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A Man of Millions

By S. R. KEIGHTLEY

Author of "The Crimson Sign" "The Silver Cross" &c.



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1

ANDY WEN
CLUB
YAGEL

A Man of Millions.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEAGUE OF BLOOD.

SIX crouching figures crept through the hole in the great hedge, careful not to break a branch, anxious not to disturb a twig. They stood for a moment congregated on the further side, clear under the young soft moon and the silver sheen of the stars, and then they crept in Indian file towards the old wooden shed that lay hidden at one end of the lonely, neglected gardens.

There was not a footfall heard on the grass-grown walks; not a whisper in the crisp, cold December air. The little town lay wrapped in the first sweet sleep of night. The strong arm of the Law was relaxed in slumber; the honest folk of the township had no idea of the awful work being carried out in their close vicinity.

Meanwhile, the six skulking, silent figures had clambered down the bank and reached the door of the wooden house. The leader threw open the door, perhaps unwilling to attempt the further gloom that lay within. No one ventured to ques-

tion him; not a word was spoken; not a movement attested the universal anxiety; the others were gathered at his heels. He thrust his hand first into one pocket of his great-coat and then into the other. Among the mass of miscellaneous articles collected in these capacious receptacles he searched apparently in vain, but it was only in the tone of his voice when he spoke that his disappointment made itself manifest.

“Gemini! I’ve forgotten the matches and we can’t light the candles.” There was a momentary silence and murmur of disappointment mingled with consternation.

“Then we may go home,” said a voice tuned to the last pitch of dogged decision. “I’m not going into that dark hole without a light. I’m sure there’s a lot of rats about.”

“You shut up, Stumpy,” answered the leader with imperious decision. “The band’s not afraid of rats or any rubbish of that kind. If you’re in a funk already you may go home,” he added in a tone of lofty contempt.

“A leader shouldn’t forget things,” was the sullen reply. “There’s no fun sitting in the dark, and besides we can’t see to take the oath.”

“Much you know about that. You were always a watery chap, Stump.”

The leader pushed the door wide open, took or step over the threshold, and then paused irresolutely. Either the darkness was more intense th:

he had anticipated, or he was unwilling to drive his followers too far.

"It is dark," he said emphatically, "and there's a hole somewhere in the floor near the table that a fellow might break his leg in. I say, you fellows, I remember I gave one of you the matches when I came down through the window. It was you, Mops."

"You might as well have left them at home if you gave them to Mops," said the rebellious Stumpy. "I'm jolly sick of the band. It's all nonsense."

"I never read of a band that hadn't a traitor, and his doom was always death on the nearest tree. Don't forget that, Stumpy. Now let me have the matches."

The unfortunate Mops, the youngest and least truculent of these midnight marauders—a blue-eyed bandit of twelve—had suddenly remembered the duty which had been assigned to him, and with both his hands plunged in the pockets of his overcoat was searching for the missing matches. Already a hundred times he had wished himself safe in bed. He was afraid of the darkness; he was terrified at the silence; and the thought of the awful and mysterious career of crime on which he was about to embark filled the empty night with threatening shapes. But now he knew that he had been false to his trust, untrue—as his great leader, Dicky Wells, might put it—to his salt. He suddenly remembered the hole in his pocket which he was

always forgetting and which was continually reminding him of its existence; and he knew with a swift, instinctive certainty that he might now search in vain.

"I don't know—but I am afraid, Dick, they are all gone. I forgot that wretched hole."

"Let me see," cried Richard with despairing eagerness, forgetting for a moment the stern self-restraint of leadership in his anxiety. "You don't mean to say you put the matches in that bally pocket? You're an awful nuisance, Mops." Without another word Dick proceeded to search the treacherous pocket, while the little crowd stood in silent expectation in the darkness, with only an occasional chuckle from Stumpy; and then the leader gave a shout of relief that found an echo in every beating heart.

"By Jove, Mops, you're a daisy. There's two left and I'll bet they haven't got a head. Now keep out of the way, you monkey, till we try our luck."

Richard Wells was a great man, though he was now threading the awful labyrinth of crime. He possessed the first quality of a born leader—of keeping his followers in absolute subjection, and presenting a serene and smiling countenance in the hour of trial and adversity. He was most truly great in the presence of the Impossible. In the eyes of his followers he was one of the forces of Nature, and was then greatest when all the others were arrayed against him. If loyalty and devotion are the bulwark of a throne, the empire

of Richard Wells was firmly established, and no tyrant ever exercised a despotism more arbitrary and unconscious. It was merely the result of circumstances that at present he was playing the rôle of Captain of banditti, for his reading—the excellent Virgilius and respectable Livius proving unattractive—having turned in the direction of a more modern and exciting fiction, he had conceived the idea of a war with society, and with his usual promptitude had proceeded at once to action. The conception was a brilliant one; the material ready at his hand. There was almost an embarrassment of riches in the way of followers, and his one difficulty was in the selection. But he had matured his plans carefully, dropping no hint and making no confidant. The vicar of the parish could not imagine why his only son had been so quiet for days, and had almost begun to hope that his youthful scion was beginning to amend his ways. Alas! had he only known the awful schemes which were weaving in that young head wakeful on the pillow; had he only seen the bundle of manuscript written in red ink, and starred and dotted with grinning death-heads, that was rolled up in his pocket, he would have known it was only the deceptive calm that precedes the thunderstorm. For Dicky Wells was determined to create an epoch. The League of Blood—he rolled the words under his tongue and felt that only a great man could have invented such a title—should take its place among the famous bands of history, and

he determined that the fame of his exploits should equal those of Robin Hood or Sixteen Stringed Jack. He was not sure to what dazzling height he should yet ascend. But at least the organization should be complete and perfect, and founded upon the best models.

When he first imparted with due mystery and secrecy the plan to his most attached followers they caught up the idea with enthusiasm, and proclaimed Dicky the heaven-born genius he knew himself to be. There was only one drawback, which seemed a very serious one—the place and hour of the inaugural meeting. Dick had decided this among other things. The time must be as near midnight as possible, and he gave twelve sufficient and convincing reasons upon the point. It was the hour when all good boys should be in bed, but they were about to break with goodness; it was inconvenient and dangerous, and might lead to unpleasant consequences if they were discovered, but that was the very reason for his choice: in a word, he was so eloquent and insistent that he overcame all opposition without much difficulty. But the Grange garden was a different matter. The old house standing on the outskirts of the town had a very indifferent reputation, and for eleven years had been tenanted only by the ghosts who were well known to be in occupation. Since old Mr. Colthurst's death no caretaker had ever been within the door; no hand had lifted a latch, or lit a fire upon the hearth; no spade had turned the earth in

the gardens, and the whole place had fallen into picturesque ruin and decay. It was the very place to attract Dicky Wells in his more adventurous moments, and upon one occasion he had discovered the disused tool-house, and at once declared it to be a perfect place of retreat in a time of danger and misfortune. There was only one place in the hedge through which to effect an entrance, and that was so cunningly concealed that only the eye of genius at fifteen could discover it.

It required all Dicky's powers of persuasion and ridicule to induce his followers to consent to his proposal, and he lost several promising recruits by refusing to accept any compromise. It must be the Grange garden or nothing. But Dicky knew the world, and he knew that in all heroic undertakings the leader is greater than the circumstances. It was true the band was not so numerous as he had hoped. There were not many of his admirers who could escape the parental eye at the hour on which he had fixed, and when all the world imagined they were wrapped in slumber. There were still fewer who cared to face the unknown dangers of the place of meeting, but Dicky felt these obstacles were the touchstone on which to try the worth of his friends, and in any case probably the Idea was more important than the perfect Achievement.

Dicky felt that the fate of his undertaking depended upon the match he held in his hand—to fail now meant the loss of his prestige as a great and

successful captain. His heart was beating like a bell, but outwardly he was as cool as a fish, and his hand was steady as a rock.

“You fellows keep close and don’t move. And Tommy, be ready with the candle.” Then, taking his cap in his hand, he gathered himself in the corner of the doorway and struck softly. There was no response but the sound of the dull scratch, and he struck again, boldly and promptly. This time there was a tiny spark, a moment of intense expectation, when fate trembled in the balance, and then a great rush of life and joy filled six anxious hearts, as the flame caught the wood and showed in the darkness like a bonfire.

Dicky was determined to make no mistake; he had no intention of imperilling his success by any hasty movement. With the calm and deliberate air of a great artist he allowed the little spire of flame to gather strength and volume, and then taking the candle from Tommy Wilkins’s trembling hand, he set the wick alight and advanced into the house. The rest followed rather with the air of condemned criminals than of daring conspirators, and watched Dicky placing the candle upon the table and lighting the others, as though they were witnessing the preparations for their own execution. The adventure was not what they had expected; the surroundings were not such as inspired confidence; the light only served to make their terror the more real and natural. They all felt that Dicky Wells was carrying his feeling for romance too far, though perhaps they did not

put it quite in that way to themselves. But Dicky himself felt that the spiritual thermometer was going down, and knew that it was time to assert himself, and inspire his disappointed followers with a little of his own enthusiasm.

"Now then," he cried, feeling that the great hour had arrived, and bringing from his pocket a great horse pistol with a flint lock (the Vicar would have at once recognised it), which he laid proudly upon the table, "one of you fellows shut the door, and bring up two forms. The one in the corner has a game leg, but you can prop it up with a box. We'll get to work with the League now in a jiffy, and then you'll see how the thing will go."

"I wish we hadn't come at all," said Stumpy, who had been in a rebellious mood since they began. "I'm sure we'll be found out, and then there'll be a blooming row, and a jolly good licking for all of us. My uncle says——"

"Your uncle's a bally idiot," said Dick, impatiently. "Have you shut the door, Stoddart major?"

"The rotten old thing won't latch," said Stoddart, who wished to get within the circle of light as quickly as possible. "I say, Dick, Stump is right for once, and the sooner we get home the better. There's no fun in sitting here to be eaten by the cockroaches. They're running about under the table in thousands."

"There's no use in trying to do anything with a lot of fellows like you. Who ever heard of a band

of robbers, or pirates, or bandits, or chaps of that kind being frightened by cockroaches! We're not a lot of schoolgirls, but men——"

"And we won't have to come here very often," said Mops, timidly, his great admiration for his chief having now almost conquered his fear.

"You trust to me for that," said Dick, with sublime cheerfulness. "A brigand who knows his business won't ask his men to go anywhere he's afraid to go himself. Now will you fellows come round the table and get to business. No band is a proper band till it takes the oath and chooses its captain."

"But I thought, Dick, you were going to be Captain," said the admiring Mops.

"And so I am, you silly," cried Dick. "I should like to see the Band choosing anybody else. But we are a company of free——"

"Moss troopers," suggested Mops, who had been reading the great Sir Walter.

"Nonsense," cried Dick, "moss troopers aren't worth anything. You only find them in poetry books with a lot of nonsense about girls and rubbish of that kind. Of course I am the Captain, but I've got to be elected. Now look here, this is the first thing." Dick was always a prime and splendid hand at surprises. He always knew exactly the right thing to do and the proper time to do it, and never by any chance gave himself away by any unnecessary advertisement beforehand. On the present occasion he was as full of

offensive weapons as an arsenal. With an air of stupendous triumph he drew a large Afghan knife from the interior of his coat, and with a few preliminary flourishes of a very blood-thirsty character, drove the blade straight into the table, at the head of which he had taken his seat.

"What's that for?" said Stumpy.

"Any goose knows what that's for," answered Dick. "This is the Captain's challenge, and any of the band who wants to be leader must pull out the dagger and challenge him to mortal combat."

"Are you going to leave it there?" asked Stoddard minor in a tone of awe.

"Of course I'm going to leave it there. Night and day it has got to stand just where I've stuck it."

"Somebody's sure to steal it, and then the Vicar will give you beans," said Stumpy, whose mind was entirely practical, and who recognised the knife as one of the most interesting articles in the Vicar's museum of curiosities. "I'm sure I don't know what the band is all about."

The choice of Stumpy as a confederate was the one error of judgment which Dick had committed, but it was an error of a fine and generous nature. Dick and he had always found themselves in opposite camps, and for a time, by reason of his superior strength and activity, Stumpy had proved a formidable rival, until a great pitched battle, in which a large quantity of blood was spilled, finally decided the status of the combatants. Stumpy had borne no malice, but he could not change his

nature, and though he took part in Dick's schemes, it was always with a cold sympathy and an open criticism that had a tendency to take the spring and heart out of a romantic venture.

"I vote we don't listen to Stumpy," said Stoddart major, "he's always croaking. Come on, Dick, and let's have the oath and do the thing regular. Stumpy won't come back for the knife any way."

"I'm not such a blooming idiot as to do anything of the kind," that person answered contemptuously.

But Dick paid no attention to the remark. He had drawn out a sheet of blue foolscap (the Vicar was in the habit of writing his sermons on paper of that description) and had spread it open before him. It was a moment flattering to his pride. If the truth must be told, he had spent many long and thoughtful hours over the composition; he had polished the style; he had remodelled the phrases; adding here, subtracting there, until his daring scheme had found a perfect reflection, and now he was about to enjoy the reward of his labour. He knew that no fault could be found with his effort. He had done his work like an artist, and if it was not strictly original, at least it was startling and impressive. The literary work pleased him, but the form of the document itself filled him with pride and assured him of triumph. It was written in red ink. He had begun with blood, but soon discovered that was painful and impracticable. He

began and ended with two rows of death's-heads which he felt were in his best manner. Whenever special emphasis was required the same awful symbol drew the readers' fascinated attention, and an occasional dagger, added by way of ornament, gave the scroll an air of verisimilitude.

Dicky cleared his throat and rapped three times with the stock of the pistol on the table.

"We ought really to have had a blue light, you know, but I don't know how they make it, and I don't think it matters much either. When we've got on a bit we can manage better. The band is not formed yet. I've written it all out the way the fellows do in the books, and though one says it one way and another says it another, I think we've got it right enough here. Then you know we can alter a bit if we don't find it to fit, and we've got to have a lot of signs and passwords so that we'll know each other when we meet at a distance."

"That's nonsense," said Stumpy. "We don't want any signs and passwords to know each other."

"Oh! don't we," said Dick scornfully. "What's the good of a disguise if you are able to know a fellow when you see him? You are an ass and no mistake. Now I am going to begin, and I'll punch the head of any one who interrupts," and Dick rapped again in a truculent manner with the stock of the pistol.

"*One.* This band shall be called the League of Blood until the last member has been executed."

"But, Dick," cried Mops.

Dick did not pause, but pursued his way steadily.

"Two. Richard Doddridge Wells shall be the Captain of the band till another captain shall be chosen, and is hereby freely elected Captain for life of this Band of Blood, by the peers and potentates here assembled in this place.

"Three. The Captain shall have the power to execute with his own hand any member of this band who shall disobey orders, or betray the secret of this Band of Blood."

"Now look here, Dicky," said Stoddart major, "that's coming it a bit too strong, you know."

"It's quite right," said Dick. "There's no use having a captain if he isn't a proper one, and all the books have it that way."

"Four. The members of the band shall be as follows so long as they behave themselves properly to the satisfaction of the Captain, and if they don't behave themselves, they shall be expelled or executed according to law.

"1. Stoddart major.

"2. Stoddart minor.

"3. Reginald Octavius St. Maur, generally known as Stumpy.

"4. Thomas Alexander Wilkins.

"5. Richard Baxter White, otherwise Mops.

"6. Any other fellows elected by the band and chosen by the Captain.

"That looks all right, any way."

“You may as well do the whole thing,” said Stumpy. “The Captain comes in everywhere.”

“Of course he does—that’s why he’s Captain.”

“*Five.* The object of the band—”

But the object of the band was never known. In an instant, instead of six daring, blood-thirsty conspirators there were six trembling, white-faced boys. They sat holding their breath; you could have heard a pin drop in that solitary, silent shed. While Dick was reading, Stoddart junior had caught him by the arm, and Dick had stopped instinctively. They all heard it plainly, and they were all—Captain and followers—equally panic-stricken. *There was a footstep upon the path.* Plainly as they ever heard anything in their lives they heard a measured tread on the garden walk, clear and distinct in the frosty air. It stopped; it began again. Was it approaching or retiring?—it was an awful thought—was it real or——?

Suddenly it died away, and Mops drew a long breath, gasped for air, and seemed about to fall. Dick threw his arm round him, and I think that instinctive action awakened his spirit.

“You fellows keep together,” he whispered, “and we’ll make a bolt for it.”

And they bolted.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRODIGAL COMES BACK.

THE Vicar's conscience had been at sword's point with his inclinations, and had achieved a moral victory which left him at once triumphant and depressed. The same battle took place every Saturday afternoon and with varying issue. At times his lower nature claimed its rights with imperative insistence, and would not be denied; at times his higher self insisted on the performance of a very unpleasant duty and enjoined upon him six hours' laborious toil. It was in the matter of his Sunday sermon. Personally he preferred an old one—there were a hundred points in its favour. He was familiar with its contents; he had approved of its style and doctrine; it would be equally effectual, and it would be a pity to allow so much good material to lie waste and useless. There was no special need—indeed there was no need at all—for a new one. But while he felt all this, he had peculiar feelings on the subject, and accordingly, at least once in every month, produced a brand-new discourse with infinite toil and pains.

He would himself have been the last to claim any striking originality for his composition, ex-

cepting only in the matter of arrangement. It was even then so largely sown with extracts from other less laborious writers, that the borrowed portions dwarfed the original ground, and even that, to vary the metaphor, gave forth a strangely reminiscent ring of previous efforts in the same field. He knew that he was not an artist in words; he recognised that he was not a pulpit orator, but he knew the inmost mind of every man and woman in his parish—always excepting that of his son Dick—and he felt that this was a matter of infinitely more importance. The weekly sermon was a luxury that gave trouble to the preacher and rest to the congregation, but it was a luxury imposed by law and required by custom, and therefore he begged or borrowed every Saturday, as his conscience or inclinations controlled his actions.

He had been at work from four in the afternoon and it was now nearly eleven. He had already arrived at the “lastly” and saw a clear line to the end of his journey, though he had long since lost any definite connection between the heads of his discourse. He felt that this was no great matter so long as he kept in the right direction; so he went on hopefully with what he euphemistically called his “books of reference,” and was upon the whole not dissatisfied with the result. His progress was now easier since Walker had gone to bed. He could now breathe freely without fear of interruption, for it must be admitted his housekeeper was at once his protector and his tyrant. Her one

mission in life seemed to be to minister to his comfort, and to keep him in a state of continual expostulation. She prevented him from wasting his entire substance on the undeserving poor; she insisted that he should dine with occasional regularity; she was imperative on the subject of wet boots and sufficient clothing, and even went so far as to forbid the unfortunate gentleman to read in bed—a habit he had acquired since the death of his wife twelve years before. Upon the subject of his Sunday sermon she had views which amounted to convictions; to her mind the labour of composition involved a waste of energy which could only be repaired by continual applications of beef-tea accentuated by an occasional stimulant, and every hour she appeared at the study door armed with her restorative until she finally departed to bed. At first the Vicar had rebelled, but had finally succumbed with a sigh, and now bore the affliction as one of those crosses that are laid upon humanity for its ultimate good. After ten o'clock he always breathed more freely; from that hour there was no danger of interruption, and his jaded appetite had rest.

He leaned back in his chair and sighed a long sigh of resignation and relief. His task was almost finished. One observation from a favourite author, and two or three appropriate texts, would lead him to the conclusion, and he might then smoke the pipe for which he had been virtuously hungering and retire to bed.

At this point he usually travelled with a complaisant slowness. There was something singularly pleasant in the process of completing a disagreeable task; it was the reward of his patient virtue, and he indulged himself to the utmost. The white heat of poetic inspiration, the surge and swell of impatient eloquence fighting for utterance, even the sweet peace and satisfaction flowing from the appropriate word and charming phrase, never touched him in the frenzy of composition, but the sense of having finished filled his heart with a satisfaction perhaps as keen and lively.

He laid down his pen and snuffed the candles on his desk. He rose from his chair, and having poked the fire into a blaze stood stretching his arms upon the hearth-rug. His mind was relieved of the immense weight which had oppressed it, and he was now able to think of a hundred more congenial matters.

A sermon, he was accustomed to say without any sense of epigram, is the vanity of the preacher and the tribulation of the congregation, and treating it in that spirit, spared his hearers with a merciful consideration which was perhaps not fully appreciated. Perhaps he had not found his true vocation in the church, but then who ever finds his true vocation in this ill-conditioned and loosely-jointed world, where the fiddler sometimes is a statesman and the bishop a pantaloon? At all events, he affected an unconscious compromise which, while producing no great effort of pulpit

eloquence, gave him unlimited opportunity for indiscriminate and profligate alms-giving. The three years he had spent in a line regiment before his imperative call to a family living had perhaps unfitted him for the nice appreciation of the essential facts of his calling.

He was longer than usual in finishing his task to-night. As sometimes happens with less indulgent fathers, his mind was at present occupied with his son Richard, who had been more than usually energetic and original during the past week. As a final commentary on the conduct of that young gentleman he had accidentally discovered the manuscript by which the League of Blood was incorporated, and was now fully aware of all the designs that daring conspirator had in contemplation. The discovery of this important secret had neither pained nor appalled him. The immaculate Vicar of the parish could himself hardly look for enrolment in this lawless band, but it is to be feared in his secret heart he looked upon it with a certain sympathy. Never particularly self-assertive himself, the splendid egotism of the youthful leader brought a pleasant smile to his lips, and more than once he looked at the face that watched him from the canvas above his desk, and he remembered that Dick—turbulent, wayward, immitigable Dick—had his mother's eyes. He sometimes wondered whether he spoiled the boy in giving him free scope and rein, and then, like other fathers, he felt that such treatment might

spoil other boys but that it could not spoil Dick. It was natural for a gallant lad who had in him the making of a man, to show something of the original savage; that was the stuff out of which the worker, the soldier, the hero, was made.

The Vicar had spent so long over his thoughts that he made up his mind with a sigh to write no more to-night, but to trust to chance for a happy inspiration in the morning. He laid down his pen after wiping it carefully—he was methodical in these matters—and took up his pipe with the air of a man who has just returned home after a hard day's work.

But he was not fated to enjoy the reward of his abstinence. He had only seated himself in the depth of his easy-chair when he heard the clear, distinct click of his garden gate—it was a fine night with a sharp touch of frost—and immediately after the sound of footsteps upon the gravelled path. The Vicar looked at the clock on the mantel-shelf, laid down his pipe, and relieved his feelings with a mild, clerical exclamation :

“What a nuisance! It's too slow for a sick call, too late for a charity, and too audacious for Piper. It's Hodgen the churchwarden. What the dickens does the fatuous donkey want at this hour of the night?”

The sound of the footsteps ceased as he waited for the irritating tinkle of the door-bell which Mr. Hodgen, as a person in authority, always pulled twice.

There was a long pause, and then, to his astonishment and consternation, a handful of gravel was thrown lightly against the window. For nearly a minute he stood motionless in the centre of the room, and, from whatever feeling, grew pale even to the lips.

“Good God!” he cried, “can it be——? No, no. It is impossible. Perhaps it is some nonsense of Richard’s. It couldn’t be——”

A shower of gravel struck the window a second time. The Vicar hesitated no longer. Though the hand trembled a little with which he lifted the candlestick, he walked across the room with a resolute air and with his head up. It took him some time to resolve the mystery of the bars and chains with which Mrs. Walker invariably secured the hall-door. He threw the door wide open and stood on the threshold with the flaming candle held high above his head. He saw no one for a moment. Then the light fell distinctly on a man wrapped in a great-coat, who stood within the shadow of the porch.

The Vicar gave an almost audible sign of relief; he did not recognise the face which he now saw clearly.

“Well, sir?”

“Mr. Wells, I believe?”

“That is my name. It is a late hour. May I enquire what is your business?”

The Vicar never had any sympathy for the able-bodied tramp at the beginning of an interview,

however far ill-placed pity might get the better of justice and judgment afterwards.

"I am afraid it is late. I cannot help it. I have a message for you."

"Well?"

"It will take me some time to deliver."

"Your message is from——?"

"My message is from the dead, sir."

The Vicar did not start; his nerves were of the sort that work well in little dramatic incidents of this kind. He held the candle out before him and looked straight into the face of the man who stood opposite. He saw nothing that awakened any recollection of the past.

"You had better come to my study. We shall be quite free from interruption there."

He held the door wide open, and waited until the stranger entered; then, remembering that Walker was endowed with all a woman's inquisitiveness, he closed the door softly after him.

"Now, sir, will you be good enough to follow me. My small household is by this time asleep."

He led the way upstairs to his study without another word, apparently cool and collected but with a certain beating of his heart. He laid down the candlestick upon the table, and then, walking to the hearth-rug, turned round with an air at once defiant and embarrassed. The stranger closed the door, and the two looked at one another without speaking.

"Now, sir," said the Vicar, startled by the look

with which he was met. "What have you to say to me? I never cared about mystery."

"You are not much changed, George."

The Vicar started as if he had been struck, and made a forward movement. He was no longer master of his emotion. Whatever news he had expected to hear, and he had expected no good news, he was not prepared for the words he had just heard.

"Good God!" he cried, almost under his breath, "it cannot be possible that you have come back—you, Percival Colthurst? We thought——"

"That I was safely dead and buried," the other returned with a boisterous laugh that had a musical note in it. "One's friends always hope for the best in this world. Oh yes! I am a fairly substantial ghost. You see, my dear George, the Prodigal invariably comes back."

The Vicar was not in the mood at that moment to discuss nice, theological questions. He was thinking of quite a different and more important matter.

"But was it wise?" he asked; "was it safe?"

"Wise! safe! It is so long since I heard the words that the sound is nearly as refreshing as the sight of that honest smug old countenance of yours. I don't think I was ever particularly wise, and I am confident I never was what you might call safe."

The speaker had flung his wide-awake on the study table, unbuttoned his great-coat, and leaned

back in the easy-chair into which he had thrown himself with the air of one thoroughly at home.

“Good heavens!” he went on, “it is like a dream. The same honest old face with a wrinkle or two more than I remember; the same old books; the same old dressing gown; and the same old teapot that I suppose has gone on pouring out its innocuous flood every day since I left home eleven years ago. Eleven years make a good many changes in some people, George.”

“You have changed a good deal since I saw you last, Percival,” said the Vicar, gravely.

“Beyond recognition, man, both inside and out,” was the cheerful answer. “Changed! Lord! one can’t go on supping with the devil without getting an occasional rap over the knuckles from his spoon. Changed!” he went on more bitterly, “I should think I must have changed when the only man who ever did me a kindness in my life did not know me.”

“I do not believe I should have known you. But your voice—that has not changed. I should know it anywhere. How long have you been in England?”

“Thirty-six hours by the clock—thirty-six years by computation. Landed at Southampton on Thursday, reached Wickham last night, and have spent the day—where do you think I spent the day?”

“Not——”

“No, by God! not yet. That is to come. I am

keeping that before me as a luxury not to be bolted in a hurry. In the house of my fathers, sir; in the house where I spent my happy childhood, among the memories of my youth. Ghosts! Talk of ghosts: they were all round me; waking, sleeping—and I am a good sleeper—eating, drinking, sitting, and walking; dour old ghosts, wicked old ghosts. And I was happy among them—happy because I knew they were dead and buried. I see there has been no one in the old house since my respected father died—not even to open a window.”

“I carried out the instructions in your letter, although——”

“To be sure. You did not approve, because you did not understand. Every lunatic says that of his keeper. But you have been a faithful steward, George—the only man I ever knew fit to be trusted, and you are not very pleased to see me.”

The man’s fine eyes were lit by a strange fire, and there was a change of tone in his deep, mellow voice—a change almost imperceptible, but the Vicar felt it and winced a little, though he did not show his feeling.

“I should have welcomed you—God knows how warmly, under other circumstances,” he answered gravely.

“That is my history, and should be my epitaph—‘under other circumstances.’ I should have been a good man and a happy one; I should have had

troops of friends, character, reputation, been a magistrate, and, perhaps, member for the county, 'under other circumstances.' The other circumstances never arrived, and I never had a chance. It's a fine world, friend George."

"It is as God made it."

"A lie, George, a palpable lie—the devil's work every square inch of it. You are an angel, of the other world, and I am a waif of this one. I have had eleven years of it, eleven years sampling its wickedness, and seeing its misery; eleven years sowing among the stones and reaping among the rocks; eleven years watching the waste of good material, and the devil getting the best of it every time. Christopher has had more than his share, at any rate. I am what I am, and he is—you know what Christopher is."

"I have not always approved of his conduct," answered the Vicar, guardedly, "but I trust you have not come back, Percival, to——"

"Oh! I know what you are thinking of, George, and what you have thought from that miserable moment when you first knew that I was still in the land of the living. You think perhaps I have come back to call him to a reckoning—to make up the sum upon both sides, and square the account between us. I don't know. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—that is good scripture, and excellent human nature. But I don't know. If I lived for a hundred years, and

spent every moment of my life in paying off that old score, still our account would not balance.”

“He acted badly, very badly,” said the Vicar, gravely, “but we cannot recall the past.”

“No, by God!” cried Percival Colthurst, “nor my lost youth, nor my miserable wasted life. I owe him that; I owe him everything. You did not know the whole wretched story, George. It is hardly worth telling now, but the man who stole my inheritance, robbed me of the woman I loved, and drove me, a criminal and an outcast, from home—and I a lad of twenty-two—a foolish young coxcomb entirely under his influence—cannot expect that I should treat him with much consideration. You believe in the devil, George, and so do I. The devil laid a trap for me, and I fell into it like the young ass that I was. If you knew everything, you would not wonder that I still admire my precious cousin Christopher.”

It was not all acting, though there may have been a consciously dramatic expression in the gesture. But there was a flash of hate in the fine eyes, and a tragic note in the deep voice, which were entirely at variance with the careless, nonchalant manner the speaker had worn until now.

The Vicar rose from the chair which he had taken and resumed his favourite position on the hearth-rug. There are some men who express themselves in this way when they are anxious to change a conversation which is becoming unpleasant.

“Is it worth while,” he said, “to brood over what

is over and done with and cannot be recalled? You are still a young man, and there is always hope."

"Hope, Faith, and Charity! The beautiful Christian virtues! Oh! I know your way, George—the good way—the wise way—but I could not walk in it. As I have said, I don't know, but I rather imagine it will come to a reckoning between my cousin Christopher and myself. When it does, I shall be sorry for Christopher."

"I hope you do not mean that. I am not going to preach, but, if not for your own sake, at least for the sake of Marion——"

"Let us leave the woman out of it," said Percival with decision. "You surely do not think that if Christopher were under my heel, I would spare him for the sake of his wife?"

"I do not think you are doing yourself justice in the language you are using. This is only idle talk."

"Is it? I don't know. I have put a bullet through a man since I saw you last for taking up the wrong card—a strong measure, I admit, but natural under the circumstances, as even you might have confessed. And there are two or three other little circumstances of a similar nature which show it is not safe to trifle too far with my simplicity. You see Christopher was the means of sending me to school, and he should not complain if I teach him a little of what I learnt there."

The Vicar was beginning to lose patience and

showed a little temper. There was a time when he thought he had known Percival Colthurst, and he thought he still knew him, at least upon the weaker and more impulsive side of his nature. He was of opinion that the words he heard carried in them no serious resolution or settled purpose—had he thought otherwise he would have adopted a different tone. He believed that they were merely the petulant vapourings of a man who had never felt seriously or acted boldly, and he felt that it was time to show a little firmness.

“Look here, Percival,” he said. “I suppose you will do me the justice to believe that I was always your friend and wished you well. If you had been my own son or brother I could not have felt the blow more keenly, but you were a boy then and I could make allowances. But this is a different matter. You are a man now, and should at least have learned to weigh your words. There must be no more folly; there must be no more of this idle and wicked bluster. Do you know that if there is meaning in your words you are threatening to commit murder?”

“There is a decided provincialism in your heat, George,” Percival answered coolly. “Well considered, men are only so many flies, quite as nasty, nearly as cheap, and as easily snuffed out. I have told you several times I don’t know what I shall do, but I know what I ought to do. I suppose it was my hand that wrote my excellent father’s signature to the cheque—I believe it was, though

I was tipsy and have only a vague recollection—but mine was not the mind that conceived the idea, nor was I the individual who was to profit by it. Oh dear no! Ask Christopher some day who it was put the pen into my hand. Which is the worse crime—to wreck a boy's soul, or to take a man's life?"

"I cannot see that there would be any profit in considering that question under any circumstances. But I am even prepared to admit your cousin Christopher was a thousand times more to blame than I had imagined. We cannot recall the past—for your sake I wish we could—but I have some influence with him, and it is possible——"

"What is possible?"

"That I might even now induce him to do something for you. It would be only justice."

Percival Colthurst threw himself back into his chair and burst into a great roar of laughter that awakened all the echoes of the sleeping house. The Vicar held up a warning hand in vain. The laughter had a barbarous note in it, and seemed to him almost shocking under the circumstances. It ceased almost as suddenly as it began, and was succeeded by an interval of silence as ominous and unpleasant. Then Percival rose from his chair and remained standing at the other side of the table, the lamp-light falling on his bearded face and shining eyes.

"I understand," he said slowly. "I understand. You think I am a ranting play-actor, and worse—"

that I have come back to take a miserable pittance from the man who stabbed and robbed me. By heaven! if money were everything I could buy up the whole county. Money! There are only three rich men in Europe—Rothschild, Monte Christo, and myself. Look at these, and tell me if you think I have come back to beg from my cousin Christopher.”

As he spoke he drew a leather bag from his pocket and threw it rattling upon the table. Then with a gesture of contempt—perhaps he had himself no idea that he was acting—he plunged his hand among the contents, and drew out a heap of shining stones, which he scattered lightly over the table, where they lay gleaming with a brilliance almost dazzling.

The Vicar looked in bewilderment from the treasure to the owner. He had a weakness for gems, and the sight fascinated him; he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

“There is a great fortune in these stones, Percival,” he said almost under his breath.

“They cost four men’s lives, at any rate,” the other answered, carelessly, “and yet I brought them home, who was the only one who did not particularly want them. We found the country where they grow like peas, and yet I have seen the day when I would have given them all for a mouthful of water. They are pretty things to look at.”

“They are very beautiful.”

Again Percival laughed bitterly.

"You are only a man after all, George;—a very excellent man, but the angels have no taste for diamonds—I should like you to help yourself to a few for the sake of old times. I have plenty more—more of them than I know what to do with."

But the Vicar had recovered himself and shook his head deprecatingly.

"Not for worlds—I could not afford to own even the smallest of them."

"You are right," said Percival, not in the least offended, "and I was a fool to make the offer. They have not brought any of us much luck. One died of an assegai wound—Tom Burton of Baliol—two died of thirst in the desert; one—a convict from Cape Town—died from a bullet through his heart when only two of us were left, and I came back to see my old friends, and pay my old debts."

"Great wealth needs great wisdom," said the Vicar gravely, and feeling, with a certain contempt for his own weakness, that his estimate of the man before him had altered within the last five minutes. "You will require to act very wisely. And the old charge—if you remain you will have to face that."

Percival snapped his fingers with a shrug of contempt.

"Since the lamented decease of my affectionate father there are no witnesses left except, perhaps, the excellent Christopher, who himself assisted to write the document, and was at any rate an accessory before the fact. He is not likely to move far, and it is the business of nobody else. Oh no!

Of all those who took part in the drama there is no one living now but Christopher and myself, and the thing is dead as the Pharaohs. Mine was an excellent father, George.”

“He was hard on his own flesh and blood, at any rate, but I think on his death-bed he regretted——”

“And he left me the old house, and his nephew—the saintly Christopher—sixty thousand pounds. You do not imagine he intended to do me a kindness when he left me the succession to that grey, old prison with its ghosts and shadows? Nothing of the kind, my friend. It was to remain hung round my neck like the Ancient Mariner and the Albatross. It was to be a curse, not a blessing. But I think Ah Sin and I can make ourselves comfortable anywhere. You must know Ah Sin, George—a perfect Chinaman whom I have imported as an antidote to popular Christianity.”

The Vicar did not notice the latter part of the speech, nor did he evince any interest in the missionary Chinaman.

“You surely do not intend to stop at the Grange; you cannot live there.”

“Why not? I can live anywhere. I have learned to simplify my wants.”

“But your neighbours will expect——”

Percival roared with laughter.

“Long may the little parishes of England flourish! Man, when you travel back to the naked savage as I have done, you will find that the individual is everything and the community is nothing.

Neighbours! The critics who live next door; the spies and enemies who dine with you. I shall have no neighbours. If you will let me come here once a month like a thief in the night, I shall be perfectly satisfied with my society."

"I do not think you will put me off quite so easily as that," said the Vicar, holding out his hand with that pleasant smile which few men found it possible to resist; "I have made up my mind to tame the savage, and I have some hope of succeeding."

Had Mrs. Walker known at what hour the visitor left, she would have been still more puzzled and indignant than was her condition of mind when she found the empty glasses and the cigar ashes in the morning. She was superlative in the art of indirect cross-examination, but the Vicar parried her questions with an evasiveness irritating to a woman anxious to do her duty. Indeed, it was nearly four in the morning when Percival left the vicarage, and when he was gone, the Vicar sat down to consider the case of the man who had turned his back on civilisation and had tasted the delights of barbarism.

CHAPTER III.

TREATS OF A LITTLE FAMILY HISTORY.

At times there is no question more interesting to a woman than the reason why some women have married some men, and perhaps the same question may have occurred to some women from the other point of view. Indeed, in certain moods, one might be inclined to go further, and ask whether it has not occurred to some women themselves to inquire why they have married particular individuals, or, indeed, married at all.

The question in many cases might prove difficult to answer; in some impossible. But it may be in this important matter as in others that we almost inevitably drift into embarrassing and unpleasant situations, and then, when it is too late, waken up to ask ourselves how we could possibly have got into the dilemma with our eyes open. Marriage is, of all difficulties, the easiest to create and the most difficult to dissolve.

Marion Fenwick's friends never ceased to wonder how she came to marry Christopher Ashworth; on one matter they were in perfect agreement—that

she had never ceased to regret it. It was not that she had ever given expression to her feelings upon the subject, but they took the fact for granted, and reasoned upon the matter without charity and without any unnecessary bitterness.

Percival Colthurst the elder had the reputation of being a very rich man, and it was the subject of surprise that upon his death he was found to have left only the trifling matter of some sixty thousand pounds in addition to a little real estate. But during his whole life he had been a curious and disappointing man. He had always lived very much alone; he had never made any friends, and had affected to treat the world with contempt and cynical derision when he expressed himself at all. He was accustomed to say that he had made only one mistake—he had married a wife and begotten a son. This mistake, however, he had atoned for by quickly breaking his wife's heart, and treating his son with a severity and harshness which was too consistent and continuous to have its spring merely in temper. He certainly never showed any affection for the child, and this feeling of dislike grew in intensity, until, before his death, it finally reached something very nearly approaching hatred. He may have had some reason in his own mind for this treatment; it was too unnatural and monstrous to be spontaneous, but if there was any reason, he kept it locked up in his own heart, and never gave the world any clue to the secret.

The boy was certainly to be pitied. Naturally

bright, vivacious, and headstrong, he was ruled with a hand of iron; his childish faults were magnified into serious crimes; he lived in continual disgrace. He could not remember the time when he had not looked upon his father as his natural enemy. At first he had regarded him with fear, but as he grew older his bold and audacious spirit asserted itself, and he met his harshness with silent and stubborn resistance, and later with open defiance. There were months at a time when they never spoke and hardly saw one another. The boy spent his days at school and his nights in the dreary old house which he had almost altogether to himself, for two servants constituted Mr. Colthurst's entire establishment. Had the father desired to ruin his son soul and body, he could have adopted no better and more efficacious treatment, and it was rapidly bearing fruit. Percival was to be found in the bar of the Wickham hotel when he should have been in bed; he was known to spend his days in the billiard room, and had a tail of acquaintances who were chiefly remarkable for their disregard of appearances and their dislike to employment entailing industry.

It is probable his father knew nothing regarding this new development; if he did his interest in the boy did not appear to be sufficient to try to save him, and Percival was only too evidently going straight to destruction when Mr. Wells was installed in the parish of Wickham. The new Vicar was a near relation of Mr. Colthurst, and he and

his wife soon displayed a warm interest in the friendless and neglected youth, which its object at first regarded with suspicion as merely evangelical and conventional. But the boy was hungering for friendship; he was only too eager to respond to overtures as sincere as they were warmhearted; and it was not long before the new Vicar had broken down the barrier of sullen reserve and established a warm relation between them.

Percival Colthurst was enthusiastic in everything—a legacy bequeathed to him by his Italian mother—and his devotion to his new friend exceeded all bounds. He almost established himself in the vicarage; he remodelled his life, and honestly tried to amend his faults. He even went so far as to endeavour to effect if not a reconciliation, at least an understanding with his father. And though the old man swore and rejected the flag of truce so held out, the Vicar was full of hope that there was a future before the boy, who was full of brilliant parts.

This was certainly the happiest period of Percival Colthurst's life. The handsome boy, ardent and high-spirited, found a new zest and meaning in life. He showed some aptitude for books, though his heart was in the covert and the hunting-field. He began to make friends with his equals, and gave himself up with an idolatrous and chivalrous worship to the Vicar's young wife, whose influence over him was even greater than that of her husband. When she died suddenly and unexpectedly,

her husband's grief, acute as it was, was hardly more real and poignant. The passionate sorrow of the youth touched the newly-widowed husband deeply—it was the form of sympathy which appealed to him most eloquently in his own despair—and it brought them together in quite a new relationship. Friendship is the child of strong emotions. If any one had told the Vicar a year before that Percival Colthurst was to become a friend to whom he could unbosom his grief and trouble, he would have smiled with incredulous good nature at a statement so ridiculous. But it fell out in this way notwithstanding, and for at least a year before Percival went to Oxford the youth and the heart-broken man—his wife had been the crown and idol of his life—spent their days and evenings together, and drew from the well of a common sorrow a draught of peace and friendship.

But Oxford was the turning-point of Percival's life. Here two things happened to him—he fell in love with Marion Fenwick, and he made the acquaintance of his cousin Christopher.

Love taken in moderation is an excellent medicine for youth, but love taken as it was taken by Percival Colthurst is dangerous in the extreme. He wooed in a divine passion; he alternately hoped immoderately and despaired unutterably, and in his intervals of despair sought the aid of another passion to bear the burden of this one. At a distance from all friendly remonstrance and advice;

he fell a victim to the fascinations of the racecourse, and began to gamble with that reckless enthusiasm which characterised his nature in every relation. At first fortune favoured him, as she generally favours most fools before she destroys them, and then misfortunes burst upon him like an avalanche. How far Mr. Christopher Ashworth was responsible for the hideous ruin which followed can never very well be known, but it is certain that he was at his cousin's elbow from the time he entered upon his downward course until the very moment of his fall.

The elder was already a man of experience. He had held Her Majesty's commission for a brief period, and had quitted the service to the entire satisfaction of his brother officers, who thought they observed in his conduct something more than the irresponsible waywardness of youth. He had already passed from the stage of the pigeon to that of the hawk, and was endeavouring to find in the follies of others some compensation for his own. Percival was no doubt a very welcome morsel, and the stable which they owned in common was a good deal more satisfactory to the elder partner than to the younger. The broken man about town and the enthusiastic undergraduate with some four thousand pounds which came to him from his mother, soon found their joint affairs complicated beyond disentanglement, and the question of the cheque now arose which sent Percival flying from the country with the law

clamouring at his heels. The cheque in question was one purporting to be signed by his father in favour of Christopher Ashworth, for four hundred pounds. Immediately it was brought before the old man's notice, he disavowed the signature, and placed the matter in the hands of the authorities. It was in vain that his friends endeavoured to hush the scandal up; he was inexorable; he declared that the law must take its course; no remonstrance or entreaty was of the slightest avail. A warrant was issued for the arrest of the forger, but he had already made his escape, and all efforts to discover his whereabouts were fruitless.

This episode, so tragic in its consequences for the unhappy youth, brought the old man and his nephew more closely together. Christopher was sympathy itself; he refunded the four hundred pounds which had been paid to him by the unsuspecting friend who professed to have cashed the cheque, and upon the strength of this sacrifice was enabled to establish a friendly relation with his uncle, of which he was not slow to profit. He obtained a footing inside the Grange; he flattered the old man's weakness and ministered to his vices; he bore patiently with his abuse and smiled imperturbably under the lash of his savage temper; he sacrificed his own feelings and abandoned his own pursuits; hardest of all, he became respectable. He had a difficult part to play, but he played it with perfect tact and absolute success. Very likely the old man saw through his schemes, and taunted

him a thousand times with his deceit and treachery; but he was useful and obsequious. It was not a case of Jacob and Esau, for in this instance poor Esau had probably never had a chance, but when the misanthropic old sinner went blaspheming out of life and his will was opened, it was found that Mr. Christopher Ashworth had been left practically everything. That fortunate gentleman felt that he had not spent these two years in vain; sixty thousand pounds cannot be picked up every day and meant a great many very pleasant things. And the poor Prodigal? He had left no trace behind him; he had passed out of the knowledge and memory of men, and for eleven years no one had heard of his existence until the very few people who had taken an interest in him came to look upon him as dead. It had surprised a good many people that in disinheriting him his father had not altogether forgotten him. Under the will the Grange had passed to the son whom the testator had disowned—a barren and profitless inheritance—and it had lain closed and tenantless from the time of the old man's death until the present hour.

Perhaps Percival was right; there are some men whose motives are hard to follow. It may have been that the malignant hatred of the dead hand was willing to follow him from beyond the grave, and that in this final gift an unnatural father imagined he was laying a curse on a son whom he had hated in life. That, at any rate, was how

Percival always viewed it, and there was no one who had known his father better than himself.

A year after the old man's death Marion Fenwick had married the prosperous and successful Christopher. To those who knew her intimately the step was incomprehensible. No pressure had been brought to bear upon her; she had entered into the engagement of her own free will and with her eyes open, and she had carried out the contract coldly, dispassionately, and, for one of her temperament, almost cynically. She had loved Percival Colthurst, or believed she loved him; she had been willing to marry him, and when he had fled from the country under the circumstances narrated, she had felt that her heart was broken, and her happiness shattered in the dust. And yet three years afterwards she had gone to the altar with the man who had supplanted him—a man for whom she had no affection and regarding whom she had cherished no illusion. She could have looked for no happiness in this step; it was a marriage neither of ambition nor of love. It had not occurred to her friends that it might be a marriage of renunciation, and that sometimes that important ceremony is upon one side or the other merely a sacrifice—the final testament of acquiescent despair, and recognition that the past is irrevocable.

This was the last act in the drama of Percival Colthurst's youth.

CHAPTER IV.

AN AFTERNOON CALL.

SPECULATION ran riot; it was many years since Wickham had been so deeply stirred. At the Spotted Dog the matter was discussed over innumerable tankards of beer, and formed almost the sole topic of conversation at those mysterious and sacred gatherings where the married and single ladies of the little town discussed tea, muffins, and their neighbours. A hundred ingenious theories were propounded; a hundred explanations were offered; but the facts were still meagre, and the mystery remained delightful and apparently insoluble. There could be no question there was some one in occupation at the Grange. No doubt the gate remained locked and the blinds were still drawn, but day after day, unless the evidence of the senses was to be denied, the smoke was to be seen ascending from the chimneys. Above all, there was the Chinaman—a real Mongolian with an absolute pig-tail and inscrutable face—who issued every afternoon from the side gate, and did his simple marketings by signs chiefly and almost without opening his mouth. The general opinion had been at first that he was both deaf and dumb,

but the later, and apparently more correct view, was that his silence was the result of design and part of the great secret. Miss Scrope, a lady with a strong missionary spirit, had stopped him several times, at first with mild and persuasive enquiry, and lastly with a tract which he actually accepted without remark. Mr. Hodgen, as a person in authority, had endeavoured to compel a response, but even his authoritative and imperious manner had failed to make any impression. Both the lady and gentleman felt, however, that they had gained some importance from their adventure, and a new insight into the character and habits of the East. Both spoke of his curious, melancholy smile, his eyes with centuries of wisdom and cunning behind them, and the feeling of awe inspired by his parchment-like face.

“I assure you, my dear,” Miss Scrope afterwards admitted, “his ears kept moving all the time I was speaking to him, and the deep wrinkles kept running all over his yellow face, till I felt it was positively uncanny. I am sure he is a bad and wicked man, but then the Chinese are exceedingly picturesque, and, after all, poor man, he cannot help his face. One cannot choose at pleasure to be born a European, with all the advantages of a Gospel dispensation, and we have got to make allowances. Still I wish I could have drawn him into conversation. It would have been quite edifying and instructive.”

The question still remained, who was the China-

man's companion? That he had a companion was not to be questioned, for he had been observed once or twice after night, and had been seen from a distance on two occasions as he crossed the shrubbery during the day. Had that unfortunate young man, Percival Colthurst, really returned, or had some interloper taken possession of the house during his absence? Really it was time that something should be done with regard to the matter, and Mr. Wells, as a near relative and a magistrate, should make some investigation. But the Vicar only smiled and shook his head when interrogated. He believed there was some one in possession at the Grange—a gentleman who desired to observe his privacy and did not care for intrusion. It was all right, he had not the least doubt, and they should learn everything in time. With this answer, unsatisfactory as it was, anxious enquirers were compelled to content themselves, while the general feeling was that the closed gates, shuttered windows, and perambulating, silent Chinaman, were nothing less than an outrage on a respectable community. In addition, Mr. Wells knew a great deal more than he cared to disclose—that was Walker's view, only made known to the large circle of her private friends, and Walker was seldom wrong in any matter that concerned the Vicar.

In the meantime Percival Colthurst was leading his own life, entirely regardless of the comments of his neighbours and the anxiety his mysterious movements had aroused. Ah Sin, who purchased

his newspapers, posted his letters, and procured his provisions, was his only means of communication with the world outside, and Ah Sin was discretion itself. The millionaire rose late and went to bed early; smoked all day, read newspapers with flagging attention, played at cards with his servant, who seldom opened his lips, and never stirred outside the secluded grounds. The only room he occupied was the large dining-room upon the ground floor. He had had his bed brought down here; his most valued possessions were piled up in the corner, a sofa from which he seldom moved was drawn up to the wide hearth, and various trophies of the chase and mementoes of his adventurous travels hung upon the walls from which he had removed the family portraits. If Ah Sin had been a thinking being and interested in human character he would have found a curious study in his master. The house was desolate and dilapidated, the long, low-ceiled rooms full of silence and shadows, and the view from the dining-room windows, where the boisterous hermit lived, a wilderness of neglect and decay. But Percival Colthurst was apparently cheerfulness itself; he roared over Ah Sin's solemn and mechanical airs, and swore at him with a vigour and heartiness which is supposed to accompany excellent health and an untroubled conscience. His threat to call upon the Vicar had not yet been carried into execution, and the only communication that had

passed between them had been a note carried by Ah Sin in his impregnable, stolid fashion.

Upon an afternoon about eight days after he had taken up his residence at the Grange, Percival had finished his midday meal, and was sitting in his shirt sleeves watching, through a cloud of tobacco smoke, Ah Sin removing the remains of his repast. After a while he rose to his feet and yawned.

"I'm getting tired of this life, Johnny, dog-tired, and that's the truth. You are too full of virtues for me, my son, too perfect, too much like a watch that goes all day and is wound up every night. There is nothing in this world that I can't stand but perfection, Johnny. Why the dickens don't you once in a while put too much salt in my soup; why don't you get drunk surreptitiously on my whiskey, and let me have a fair round on you? The truth is, you are not human, John. At any rate you are more comfortable here than you were in the camp at Springfontein."

Ah Sin made no answer in words; he merely closed his little eyes and showed his yellow teeth by way of response, and in a moment his face was as impassive as ever.

"That was a bad half-hour you were having, my saffron friend, and it was as well for you that I came along. There's no doubt those two Dutchmen would have skinned you alive, and that's an uncomfortable process even for a Chinaman. I thought at first it was a pig they were at work on, but a pig would have squealed. I daresay the big

fellow is limping yet—I saw him in the hospital afterwards at Buluwayo, and he bore me no malice, but he swore you had the stones, John. I suppose you have them right enough?” added Percival carelessly.

“He dam liar,” cried Ah Sin, with an emphatic gesture. “He dam liar all litee.”

Percival roared with laughter.

“I know how to touch you now, Johnny. I see the point where the East and West meet. *Auri sacra fames*, my Celestial friend. Oh, John, John, it’s a melancholy thought that there’s no living being, white, red, or yellow, woman or man, who wouldn’t sell himself, body and soul, slander, lie, steal, bear false witness, and commit every other sin in the decalogue for a handful of yellow dirt. You have deceived me, John; I thought you were perfect. I should have passed by on the other side and let them rip off that yellow skin of yours.”

“Me good Chlistian,” said Ah Sin, with a melancholy shake of his head.

“I never knew a rogue but one who wasn’t. What have you done with the stones?”

Ah Sin again shook his head deprecatingly.

“All right, never mind. I hope they bring you comfort. I’m the only white man in the five continents who knows where they grow, John. I’ve seen them heaped up in barrows—full as big as eggs; I’ve waded in them, bathed in them, played at marbles with them, all by myself in the Karoo. I thought I should have gone mad with joy, but that

feeling never lasted long in my case. Joy—what, in the name of all that is wonderful, is that?”

He stopped short and listened, frowning. There was clearly some one endeavouring to storm his stronghold, for the house-bell was ringing violently. It ceased, and began again.

“You lazy ruffian, you have left the gate unlocked. If I thought you had done it purposely, I should certainly have had your life. Take the shot-gun with you and let them know as politely as you can that is the way we are likely to receive visitors. Tell them war has been declared, and the Yellow Dragon will stand no nonsense.”

The momentary smile that only deepened his wrinkles spread over Ah Sin’s face, and taking up the formidable weapon with impassive gravity, he left the room without a word.

“That should do for the ordinary caller who desires to leave an afternoon card,” thought Percival, again lighting his pipe, and throwing himself on the sofa, where he soon became absorbed in the varied advertisements of the *Times* of the previous day. It was the only portion of the paper that really interested him; it gave him a bird’s-eye view of society on the largest scale—of its desires, hopes, wants, frauds—all the rest was merely incidental. His contempt for that portion of the paper in which the views of the editor were set forth was simply colossal.

He was beginning to think that Ah Sin had been taking his visitor too seriously, when that worthy

made his appearance with a visiting card in his hand, which he extended to his master in silence. Without looking at it the latter twisted it between his finger and thumb.

“I am disappointed in you, Johnny,” he said; “you are open to the corruption of the West after all. The Yellow Dragon and the shot-gun went down before a paltry half-sovereign—perhaps it was only five shillings. What must the great Confucius think of his countryman? Now look here, my good man, and make no mistake this time. Go down to your friend and lead him quietly but firmly to the gate, lock that, and bring back the key. If he isn’t outside the grounds in three jumps of a grasshopper, I shall flay you within an inch of your life.”

He was about to throw the piece of pasteboard into the grate when his eye accidentally caught the name written on it. He spread it flat upon his hand and whistled; laid down his pipe and whistled again. Then he rose to his feet and executed a war dance.

“Whoop! I knew my excellent friend the Vicar would let him know. The good Christopher is not much changed. He at least is not afraid of me, and the diamonds have done the trick. Look here, Ah Sin, I have changed my mind, and you may keep the filthy lucre. Go, my son, and show the gentleman in.”

Ah Sin went out, and Percival rose to make preparations for the reception of his visitor. These

were of the simplest description. He drew the round table a little nearer to the fire, and placed a decanter upon it. He lifted a bundle of newspapers off the only available chair and flung them into a corner. Then he went over and stood with his back to the fire, smiling grimly. He had almost foreseen this episode, though he hadn't thought it would have happened so soon.

The door was opened, and Ah Sin made his appearance with a deep bow and his hands spread out obsequiously. Percival did not move from the fireplace as his visitor entered. The two men looked at each other for a moment or two without speaking, and then Percival took the other's outstretched hand without any display of feeling.

"You are welcome home, Percy. I am very glad to see you."

"Thank you," said Percival simply. "Sit down and have a drink."

His cousin did not appear to have heard the abrupt invitation, but remained standing, as though still a little doubtful of his reception.

"I only heard on Monday that you had come back. Wells ran over to see Marion and brought the news. He seemed a bit doubtful as to how we should get on together, but I knew you better than to suppose you wouldn't be glad to see me. Both Marion and I were delighted when we heard about you."

"Very much obliged to you both, I am sure.

Sit down and make yourself at home. I'm sorry there's no soda."

Christopher smiled and sat down; he was always accustomed to make himself at home wherever he might be.

"You don't give me much time," he said with a little laugh and now thoroughly master of himself, "but you were always a great fellow for getting to essentials. You're not much changed."

"Not a day older," Percival remarked sedately, "perhaps a little younger if anything, but no wiser. You are not wearing over well yourself, my dear Christopher."

"I'm not as young as I used to be, and there's no end of worry."

"No doubt," Percival acquiesced, with apparent sincerity; "worry plays the devil with a man—and woman, and drink, and cards, and debts. But you have no trouble with the duns now, Christopher."

The suggestion which underlay the words might certainly have recalled certain awkward and painful associations, but Christopher did not seem to think there was anything more in the remark than a simple statement of facts which required considerable qualification. Percival smiled grimly under his beard when he saw how his words had failed to find their mark. Heavens! To think that this man had played on him like a fiddle, squeezed him like a sponge—this shallow trickster—this sheep-faced thimble-rigger, who thought he could not see through his grimaces and his im-

udent profession of friendship. Did he hate him so much after all; had he so strong a desire to take him by the throat and squeeze the worthless life out of his black heart? Before God, he did not think he hated him so much now that he had seen him face to face.

He had always liked to meet a man in a fair stand-up fight, but he had never cared to kill vermin. And there had been a time when this man had been his little tin god; when he had followed him like a shadow, and had stepped like a fool into the little pit that was dug for him! He had come home breathing righteous vengeance, and had devised a dozen plans for its exaction, but now for the moment he began to wonder whether it was worth his while. He could break this poor creature like a rotten stick—this man whose eyes refused to meet him fairly, and whose shallow purpose he could read as plainly as if it were written out before him. It seemed hardly worth his while, and yet he was not sure. He was not a sentimentalist; he believed in the law of tooth and claw; he had followed for some years the sacred principle “do unto others as they do unto you,” and he could neither forget nor forgive. If he had seen Marion first he might have known better, but for the present——

Then he rose and held up the decanter with that mellow, reckless laugh which Ah Sin had come to fear a little. “It’s a damnable world, Christopher, above and below, outside and in, and that’s the

plain truth," he said, filling his enemy's glass half-full, "but when all is said and done there is nothing like whiskey. It takes the bitter edge off care, gives wings to time, gilds age with the gloss of youth, and robs poverty of all its fears. And so we smile at births and funerals, marriages and the meeting of long-divided friends. Why shouldn't we? And, best of all, it has turned me into a philosopher in spite of myself. Come, man, drink to our ancient friendship and this merry meeting."

Christopher looked at him for an instant suspiciously over the glass which he only touched with his lips, but seemed immediately reassured.

"You are still the same honest, good-natured old chap, Percival," he said, with a sigh of recollection which made his listener smile, "and not changed a hair. I always envied you your high spirits. I suppose you never had a touch of the blue devils in your life?"

"Never," cried Percival; "why should I? I've always been as merry as a grig."

"Eleven years haven't made you a day older. I can imagine we are still sitting in your rooms at Trinity——"

"Over that confounded cheque," said Percival. "That was a tremendous error in judgment on your part, my dear Kit, and nearly let me into an awful hole. My respected father was not the person to play tricks of that kind upon. But then I was a foolish young shaver who had taken a good deal more wine than was good for him, and you were

not acquainted with the peculiarities of my honoured ancestor."

Christopher moved uneasily.

"I don't think I had very much to do with it," he said.

"No," Percival answered carelessly. "The signature was really the important part, and you only filled in the date and one or two little matters of that kind."

"There are some things it isn't very pleasant to talk about."

"There is no reason why we should forget them. They keep us humble, and I have always been taught that is a proper frame of mind. Still it is wonderful what a lot of things came out of that simple piece of paper, Christopher. It introduced me to the world, made you pretty comfortable from a worldly point of view, and blessed you with an excellent wife."

"It doesn't appear to me that I am much better off for the change."

"Ah!" said Percival softly, as he brushed the tobacco ash off the sleeve of his rough coat, "that's unfortunate. The old man held it tight and tried to make it breed. The wrong horse, again, I suppose?"

Christopher nodded half in assent.

"I never cared much about money, and I suppose that's the reason I never can keep it. Still it's useful, and it's deuced unpleasant to find yourself

without it. I know I should have settled down and given up the whole thing, but then——”

“Bad habits,” Percival said.

“Hang it all, a man must have some amusements. And you never were tied to a woman for nine years, my boy.”

“God forbid!” said Percival heartily. “I was always a great fellow for change of air and scene. I hold, with the Turk, man is essentially a polygamous animal, though I haven’t had much time to put my theories in practice. So you can’t see your way from personal experience to recommend a domestic life for a lonely pilgrim in search of happiness?”

“Tie a stone round your neck and fling yourself into the nearest horse-pond first. A woman is all very well till she is settled for life on your back, but after that——”

“I’ve no doubt you can’t dance so freely. Try a little more whiskey,” said Percival cheerfully. “That will help you to bear your burden. I suppose I ought to say that I’m sorry things haven’t been going well with you, Christopher, but people say you are a fortunate fellow.”

“People be d——. The world knows a great deal more about a man than he knows about himself. Upon my word, Percival, I owe as much money as ever I owed in my life, and the difference is that now the fools expect me to pay them.”

“A very common expectation sometimes built on

very slight foundations. Creditors are very unreasonable people, Christopher."

"It's easy for you to say that. I'm told——"

"And what do people say about me? I suppose they know as much of my business as they know of yours."

His cousin glanced for a moment furtively at Percival's face, but there was no expression to be seen there but one of careless good nature. Then he passed his hand over his clean-shaven lips and spoke with an air of reflection.

"I hope you don't bear me a grudge, old fellow, or imagine that I used you badly. I shouldn't like you to think that. Upon my word, I should have been quite willing to have divided the money with you if you hadn't taken your leave in the hurry you did, and left no address behind you. We all thought you were dead—Wells, Marion, everybody. And now I'm glad you don't need it, for, by the Lord, I'm devilish hard up for a little ready money for myself, and it's only out of one hole into another."

"If that is a plain statement of fact," said Percival, "you haven't been long in coming to the bottom of the bag. Money is a curious thing," he continued reflectively, "and takes men in different ways. Some like to make it; some like to keep it; and some like to spend it; and then again some like to keep theirs and spend other people's."

"That would be my class if the other people would let me," said Christopher, with some

decision. "But I generally find that the other people like to spend their own."

"I have a prejudice in that way myself."

"There are very few rich men who haven't."

Percival did not appear to see the point to which he had been led, and again passed lightly from the hint regarding his own good fortune.

"You used to study them to some purpose, Kit. I wonder you didn't learn enough in the old days of stand and deliver to teach you to keep your own when you came into your kingdom."

"There isn't much use talking about my affairs and I can struggle through somehow. You have had all the luck, Percy."

"There's not a doubt about it," was the laughing answer as the speaker threw up his head and watched the spiral wreath of tobacco smoke. "I'm the luckiest beggar in the world. I have nobody to look after but myself, Ah Sin is the most excellent cook from Wickham to Peking, the stone jar never runs dry, and I can sleep eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. What more could any reasonable man want?"

"I didn't mean exactly that. The fact of the matter is that Wells tells us—I didn't think it was a secret—that you have made an enormous pile—that you are in fact——"

"I know, I know," said Percival, nodding contentedly—"a kind of walking Solomon's Temple. I guess I know the whole story he told you. Wells is a very decent old woman, but he talks too

much about his neighbours. Still I don't know that it is very much of a secret and needn't be between old friends like you and me. The fact of the matter is, my dear Christopher, I have made a very handsome pile. I don't exactly know how much to within a million or so."

Christopher looked at him in astonishment. Was the man indulging in a stupendous joke who spoke in this careless, matter-of-fact way of millions? If it had not been for what Wells had told him he should certainly have believed that. A man with millions doesn't take up his abode in a dilapidated old house with an abominable Chinaman for his only companion; he is not usually associated with a tattered shooting coat and ancient slippers down at the heels, and he does not drink raw whiskey in the afternoon or smoke tobacco with the stench of burning furze. At least that was hardly Christopher's conception of a millionaire. Yet his cousin was quite capable of this eccentricity. He had always been peculiar; he had never shown any regard for appearances, and had never known how to extract any amusement out of life. It was just like him to masquerade in this miserable way with ample means at his disposal, and he was quite right when he said that he was as young as ever he was. If this story was really true, Christopher felt there were possibilities before himself; he had never had a high opinion of Percival's wisdom, and the tools are always to him who can handle them.

“But millions! My dear Percy, you take away my breath. I always knew you had it in you to do something colossal. But millions!—”

“A few pounds more or less don’t count in a pile like mine,” said the millionaire, sedately. “Still it is rather exasperating not to know exactly how rich you are.”

“It must be deuced awkward. I wish it sometimes happened to me.”

“I never knew the time when I didn’t think other people better off than myself,” Percival replied, as if he were considering the subject. “You see one never knows how another man’s boots will fit him till he has tried them on. But mine is rather a long story. A kind of Arabian Nights.”

“Those are the fellows I always envied.”

Percival did not appear to notice the interruption.

“You may remember after you advised me not to face the music—no doubt it was excellent advice and your fifty pounds came in very useful—that I had some doubt as to the country where a fellow in my circumstances could lose himself soonest. I thought of South America, I thought of Australia, but I happened to take the wrong boat, and before I knew was landed in Cape Town with five pounds and the clothes I stood in. I was not long in discovering the advantages of a University education, and did a few odd jobs till I found out that even to do them one must get food enough to keep body and soul together. In my case nobody seemed to

think it necessary that body and soul should hang together, and I was rapidly coming to the same conclusion myself when I accidentally ran against an old friend. He was nearly as sick of civilisation as myself, and had nearly as much reason. The history of that time might be very profitable, but I will spare your feelings, my dear Christopher, for I know your tender heart. In a word, it is enough to say that we disappeared, the ways of civilisation knew us no more, and when we appeared again to view it was somewhere across the Vaal River, in no very respectable company. I needn't tell you exactly how we picked him up, but our new friend, the convict was a born explorer—a kind of Sindbad and Munchausen rolled into one. We didn't know whether to believe his story—at first, that is—but it soon got hold of us, and at any rate it was as good as anything else. I am sorry I had to shoot him in the long run, but it was either his life or mine, and then you see his story was true. Oh yes, the diamonds were there—millions of them—and I was the only one who lived to bring back the news. I have done pretty well since then, but when you come to have half a dozen mines on your mind, you don't seem to sleep with as much comfort as when you have nothing. It was a narrow shave, though, between a fortune and the Kingdom of Glory. I remember the time when I would have given all I possessed for a mouthful of water. Still one has a trick of forgetting the unpleasant parts, and the diamonds didn't run away. Barings would

cash my cheque now for a tidy sum, my dear Christopher."

"I am delighted to hear the good news," the other answered with as much enthusiasm as he could put into the words. "But you cannot go on living here, Percy. You must come and stay with us till you get a decent place. Marion will be delighted to have you——"

"I am very much obliged to you, I am sure, but I could not think of troubling you, and besides it would put Ah Sin out more than you could imagine. You see I have grown accustomed to live by myself and have lost all the tricks of civilisation—I wear its clothes, no doubt, but underneath them is nothing but paint and feathers. What can you do with a man who wears paint and feathers?"

"At least you will come and see us?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know what I shall do yet. I am very comfortable as I am, I don't fall out with my company, and I have no one to please but myself. I'm a lonely sort of beggar, Christopher."

"There's no reason why you should be. Why, man, with your wealth——"

"Oh, d—— the money. I'm sick of it all, and it's no more use to me than a handful of oats to a dead horse. It can bring me nothing that I'd give a snap of my fingers for."

"At any rate, I'll tell Marion to expect you. I know you were very friendly before you left England."

Had the man no sense of shame, no feeling of common decency? No one knew better than himself the terms upon which his wife and cousin had been in relation to one another when the latter left England, for he of all men had been in the habit of listening to poor Percival's wild declaration of his passion. Of all men he knew that he had supplanted him, and yet he was able to refer to their former relationship with a smile which put a hidden meaning upon his words. And if Percival was right in his conjecture he was doing more than that—he was baiting a pitiful trap with this old love, and with the aid of his wife was already laying his plans for the second despoiling of her former lover.

Percival looked up, but made no reply, as Christopher hesitated. Then he rose without a word, and with the most matter-of-fact air in the world took up the pack of cards with which he and Ah Sin were in the habit of lightening the tedium of a long evening. He began to deal them face uppermost in two rows.

"The old habit, my dear Kit. Go on; you were saying——?"

"Oh, nothing. Merely that Marion would be glad to see you. I am not much at home, and she is a good deal alone."

"Ah! I thought you were saying something more. You see, my friend, I am only a savage."

Here he swept the cards together and pushed them back upon the table.

"You had always great luck, Christopher. But I

don't think I shall go, at least not at present. A good husband like yourself always consults the wishes of his wife, and Mar—— Mrs. Ashworth, might not welcome me so warmly as a good-natured fellow like yourself. Women are always on the side of respectability, and my best friend would hardly dare to call me respectable. Leave me alone with the excellent Ah Sin."

"My dear Percival, you are not going to get rid of us so easily," said Christopher, rising. "You don't know Marion. There is nothing a woman loves so much as the feast of the fatted calf on the return of the Prodigal."

"Look here, Johnny," said Percival, meditatively, after his visitor had gone, "do you know what you have done?"

That personage only lifted his wrinkled brows interrogatively.

"You are a heathen and wouldn't understand it if I told you, but in this country when two Christians of the lower order go to a funeral they always put on their best clothes. I think I shall go to bed early, and we won't play cards to-night. I have had a game all to myself, and I don't know very well whether I've won or lost."

CHAPTER V.

MR. ASHWORTH SHOWS HIMSELF A MODEL HUSBAND.

WHEN Mr. Christopher Ashworth descended to breakfast on the following morning he was in an excellent temper, and consequently his wife knew from experience that he wanted a favour. He did not think it necessary, however, to address her, or to acknowledge her presence further than by a little nod of toleration which, being bestowed in private, was a considerable unbending on his part. He took up his letters in his usual methodical way—he was always a person of the most precise and exact habits—and studied the handwriting upon the envelopes as though weighing the contents.

For some time his occupation did not seem to interest him greatly—he had become used from lengthened experience to the intimation that there were many people looking for money at his hands, but there was one letter which he read several times with studied attention, and then laid upon one side of his plate. Mr. Ashworth never did anything in a hurry. He then opened his newspaper, and proceeded leisurely with his breakfast without speaking a word. His wife was equally silent, but was evidently not equally at her ease. There were some

people who said she was afraid of her husband, but that could hardly have been the case, for Mr. Ashworth never by any chance raised his voice, and she never complained of ill-usage. However, an attentive spectator, had such been present, might have observed that she was not so indifferent to his presence as she desired to appear. She glanced at him from time to time as he sat turning his newspaper, and on each occasion always immediately withdrew her eyes as though afraid of detection. Perhaps it had become a habit with her, as her husband did not seem to notice anything extraordinary, nor did he seem to notice that the eyes with which she watched him showed traces of recent tears. That also was perhaps not unusual.

It could hardly be called a cheerful breakfast. The silence was unbroken but for the rustling of the paper and the monotonous tick of the clock, where a bronze figure of Time with his inevitable scythe was mowing down the passing minutes. Outside, the lawn was swathed in mist, and the rain ran in little rivers down the window-panes.

At last Mr. Ashworth, having finished his breakfast, took up the letter which he had placed on one side. Then he turned in his chair, and looked at his wife with a smile, of which none knew the meaning so well as herself.

“I don’t think you are looking well this morning, Marion.”

“Perhaps not. I have been troubled with a headache.”

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"Ah! you should avoid headaches—there is nothing ages a woman so much. You are really growing old-looking."

His wife's eyes looked at him for a moment steadily, as though all opposition was not yet dead in them, and then fell away under his gaze.

"You are quite right," she said. "I am growing old, and perhaps it is worse that I am feeling old."

"I don't wonder at that. I don't think you were ever young."

"It seems a long time to look back on."

"Not since we were married, at any rate," he answered, with a dry laugh. "Our married life has been distinguished for its solemnity—a respectable virtue of middle age."

"I have tried to do my duty."

"Oh! we have had no end of duty and obedience—I have no respect for the man who isn't master in his own house—but I don't imagine these are the things that make a man's married life much the happier, though they make the domestic wheels run a little easier. I have been a fortnight at home, and I have come to the conclusion that domestic happiness is not exhilarating."

His wife made no answer. It was not the first time she had heard him give expression to the same opinion.

"I wonder how it comes," he went on reflectively, "that a man is never happy till he is tied to the tail of some woman for whom he doesn't really give three

straws, and then is never really happy till he gets rid of her."

"And the woman," his wife said suddenly, lifting her eyes; "what of her?"

"Oh, the woman. Most women are never happy unless they are miserable themselves or are making some one else miserable. There is no speculating about women—at least after they are married. Before that they are usually all alike."

"I suppose women are like other animals in captivity," she said, turning her wedding ring on her finger and looking down at it impassively; "they are very much what the treatment of their masters makes them. Some are well treated and are grateful, and some——"

"And some are never content except when they are skulking in corners and wanting the whip to make them lively; not of course," he added in his smoothest way, "that a man would lift his hand to a woman. At least, unless she provoked him further than he could stand. Now look here, Marion, there is no use in beginning to quarrel with me. God knows I have troubles enough of my own without letting a woman interfere with my comfort. There is something I want to say to you, and I hope you will make yourself agreeable."

"I am listening," she said, without changing her attitude.

"Well, I wish you would give me a little more attention, and try if you can take a little interest in my

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affairs. I have had a letter this morning, and there is a visitor coming for a day or two."

"In whom you wish me to take an interest?" She asked the question without any emotion of any kind betraying itself in her voice, but the colour rose to her cheeks and dyed her neck as she spoke.

"You can put it that way if you please. There is no harm in a wife taking an interest in her husband's visitors. I haven't troubled you so often in that way lately that you have any reason to complain."

"No, our visitors are not so numerous as they used to be, but I have not complained."

He rose from his chair and went over to the fireplace, where he stood looking at his wife with an expression which seemed to say that complaisance was thrown away upon her. He felt that he had been anxious to be amiable towards her, or as amiable as she deserved, and that her last remark had been intended to convey a world of reproach put in her own indirect and tantalising fashion. It was true that the world was beginning to fight a little shy of him, but it was not for his wife to emphasise the fact. He did not care a straw for the world himself, but it was no business of the woman he had married to suggest that the world did something more than return the compliment. She had posed as an ill-used woman; she had allowed her friends to imagine everything that was evil about him; and she had been a continual clog round his neck. It was all very well to talk about a woman's character being like clay; there were some women you could not

bend, and were compelled to break if you wanted to live with them at all. He had sometimes thought he had succeeded to some extent in this direction, but one could never tell when the operation was complete. "There is no use," he said at last, "in taking up that tone with me. You know very well it hasn't the slightest possible effect, and we needn't pursue the topic. As I have said, there is a visitor coming on Wednesday evening, and I hope you will at least try to make yourself agreeable to him. It is as much your interest as mine."

"Indeed. May I ask the name of this visitor to whom I am to make myself agreeable?"

"Well, if you must know," he said, hesitatingly, "it is Paradol."

She sprang hastily from her chair; the look of assumed indifference vanished, and she faced him with a blazing face, and her bosom heaving with emotion.

Mr. Ashworth did not express any surprise at this sudden change; he merely drew his cigarette case from his pocket and carefully selected a cigarette.

"Have you no feeling for me?" she cried. "Have you no respect for yourself?"

"Upon my word, I don't understand these heroics, Marion," he answered, pausing as he struck a match. "You are really exciting yourself needlessly. There are worse fellows in the world than Paradol, and he is a very amusing companion."

"You promised me the last time," she said, "that he should never come back here. You promised that I should not suffer the indignity of being a second

time under the same roof with him. I know you don't care about my feelings; I know you wouldn't turn your head if my heart were broken, but you might have more respect for your own honour and your wife's good name."

"My own honour and my wife's good name are not in the least danger—not in the least; they are perfectly safe, my dear Marion. I know you to the finger tips. You are not of the amusing kind. A woman must have a little more of the devil in her than you possess to commit an indiscretion of that sort. And Paradol! Really I gave you credit for more good taste than to suppose that you would be likely to treat him seriously."

"And I married you!"

Her tone was cold and measured: it was only her eyes that gave the words emphasis, and Mr. Ashworth was too much interested in his cigarette to observe them.

"Yes," he answered nonchalantly, "I believe you did. I have never forgotten the fact, and I have never ceased to regret it. It was a mistake, I admit—a serious error in judgment, but unfortunately we cannot undo the holy bond merely because we both made a little mistake. That is a common experience in a good many families. We must make the best of a bad bargain, my dear Marion, and work together for our common good."

"And is it for our common good that you bring a man here who has made open and shameless love to your wife?"

“You are the first woman I ever knew who objected to a little indiscreet admiration. It is a tribute to her husband’s good taste. Besides, I have no doubt you exaggerate. After all, Paradol is only a Frenchman, and the French have a florid way of putting things that is a little liable to misconstruction. I have no doubt he meant nothing.”

“I suppose it would not have mattered if he had?”

“I have such perfect confidence in you, my dear, that I do not think it would have mattered in the very least degree.” Then Mr. Ashworth changed his tone and manner. He had hitherto been languid and indifferent as if the subject was one which only interested him as a matter of speculation. All at once he became serious, and with the sudden change his wife lost her courage and shrank as if he had struck her.

“There, there, that will do. I have listened to this nonsense long enough. I am under obligations to Paradol, and it would make a cursed deal of difference both to you and me if he turned nasty now. It suits me to humour him and to treat him well. You don’t think I do it for my own amusement?”

“I suppose you know your own business best, but I shall go to Newport to my aunt Mary, if she will take me in.”

“You will do nothing of the kind; you will stay here and do your duty. You may remember we had all this nonsense once before, and you know what it led to. I don’t want a repetition of that little scene, but by — you’ll find I am quite serious now. Do

you know that Paradol could sell me up to-morrow?"

"It might be the best thing that could happen to us."

"I daresay nothing would please my model wife better, but it would not exactly suit me. If you imagine I am going to let any foolish whim of yours ruin me, you are very much mistaken."

"I have no wish to ruin you. Why do you always put the worst construction on my words? God knows I would do what I can for you, Christopher."

"Then you take a very curious way of showing it."

"You do not often give me an opportunity."

"Well, I am going to give you one now. I am not asking very much when I ask you to treat Paradol with common decency and nothing more. I'll see that he doesn't annoy you with his attentions—hang him, don't you know that I would wring his neck if I could—and look here, Marion, I am going to do something that I think will please you."

She did not appear to be much interested in the announcement—indeed she had long since lost her interest in most things—but in any case she knew that her husband's endeavours to please her were usually in matters which contributed to his own ends and led to his own convenience. Her resistance always ended in her succumbing to his will. It was not that she felt that she was fairly vanquished. She felt that she might still have resisted and had her way if it had been worth while, but she had grown

numb and torpid, and incapable of feeling greatly. That was always the secret of her giving way. If she could only see her way once and for all to put an end to this companionship which had robbed her of all feeling and spirit, she might still have taken up arms and defended herself and asserted her dignity. But there was no escape; there was no remedy. She might have given battle to her husband, but she could not fight with Fate. After such a battle there could be no victory, for there could be no release. And that, strange as it may seem, was one of the causes why she feared him so much.

Mr. Ashworth had no idea of the thoughts that were passing through his wife's mind. The matter would hardly have interested him if he had, for he was one of that easy class who consider that a woman is merely a mirror to reflect her husband's sentiments and has no business with thoughts and feelings of her own.

"I ran over yesterday to see an old admirer of yours. I thought it would only be a graceful act, and upon my word I never saw any one so much changed in my life."

Marion was interested now, but she tried to look unconcerned.

"You mean——"

"Of course I mean the unfortunate Percival. He is really living shut up in that old house all alone with the most villainous looking cut-throat of a Chinaman I ever saw in my life. I actually shuddered when I looked at him, but Colthurst seems to

enjoy it. It is quite true what Wells says. He is rolling in money and doesn't know how rich he is. He ran against a mountain of diamonds in South Africa."

Marion did not seem to hear the concluding sentences.

"Poor Percival! You say he is changed?"

"Changed? Good Lord! I should think he has changed. I did not recognise him at first. He used to be a kind of Adonis, and I never knew a man more particular about his dress. Now he has a beard like a patriarch, is growing white over the ears, weighs fourteen stone, if he weighs an ounce, and wears the worst clothes of any scarecrow in England. But I don't think he is much changed in other ways. In fact, he seems to know as little of his own mind as ever he knew in his life. I should imagine he is as simple as ever, and if his friends don't look after him——"

"If he is as rich as you say, I don't doubt his friends will look after him."

This was one of the little speeches to which his wife was prone and which Mr. Ashworth never was able to understand. He sometimes thought they were not so innocent as they seemed, and he had a suspicion that this was the case in the present instance. But the subject was one he had no desire to open or pursue.

"I'm about the nearest relative he has left, though I don't imagine either he or I would lay much stress on that. Still, I suppose it gives me a kind of claim,

and at any rate I used to be the closest friend he had."

"Yes," his wife said, without looking up. "I was thinking of your friendship, and I was wondering whether he had—forgotten. He was glad to see you?"

"He was delighted to see me. He surprised me by the warmth of his welcome, though, poor devil, to be sure he must feel lonely in that awful old ruin. I wasn't quite at my ease at first as to how he might receive me, for, of course, there was the matter of the money, and there was—youself. But he doesn't want the money now, and he has come to his senses about women. He is more than grateful to me for saving him from making a fool of himself."

"Yes, there is no doubt you were his benefactor."

"He can never know to what extent unless he were to take my place for a month or two," said Christopher with emphasis. "But I'm not going into that subject again, as you know my views pretty plainly. I want you to write him a note and ask him to dinner on Wednesday. I suppose you have no objection?"

"My objection would hardly stand in the way if I had. If he is willing to come, I do not see why I should object."

"No, to be sure, I thought you would be willing enough. We can set him off against Paradol, but you had better take care not to make a fool of yourself."

Mr. Ashworth threw his cigarette into the fire

and walked over to the window. He was desirous not to give his wife an opportunity of replying.

“It is clearing now,” he went on, “and I shall drive over to Wickham and ask Wells to come over to meet Percy on Wednesday. I know he thinks Paradol an amusing fellow, and, at any rate, he will give a flavour of respectability to the party. You can please yourself what you say in the note. And remember, no nonsense.”

Mrs. Ashworth watched him swagger across the room, and heard him close the door loudly after him. Her eyes were bright and dry; her face was flushed. Then suddenly she flung herself forward on the table and burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping. It was a long time before the passionate fit spent itself, and then she went to her own room, where she bathed her eyes, smoothed her hair, and sat down to consider the hopeless ruin she called life.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE HOMERIC VEIN.

IT was a great day in the history of the School. All the older boys were there, gravely debating the chances of the fight, and recounting the story of former contests when wonderful deeds had been done.

There was a sprinkling of smaller boys wild with excitement, drawn irresistibly by the tremendous nature of the contest, and by their admiration of the hero. These were silent for the most part, with their eyes and mouths wide open. The Nipper also had his following, who congregated in a knot by themselves, and who were very knowing and technical in their language, and confident as to the result. Then, as the occasion was really an important one, there was the sporting publican from the Nag's Head, Tony Varges, the dog-fancier, and another unknown gentleman with a heavy jaw and a broken nose, who was pointed at with mysterious finger as a celebrated light-weight champion residing temporarily in the neighbourhood.

Dick Wells was more than conscious of the importance of the occasion, and perhaps for the first time in his life it oppressed him a little. He was

about to essay the great object of his ambition; he was about to attempt the conquest of a new world. He had fought his way, step by step, to the head of the school, but his former victories seemed to him now easy of achievement and barren of result. His most ardent admirer never dreamt of claiming for him the fame and strength of the Nipper, whose wigwam was full of scalps, and who was continually on the war-path. For a long time Dick had watched him from a distance with a certain fearful admiration, and had heard of his exploits with feelings if not of envy, at least of emulation. Hitherto their paths had not crossed; they had dwelt in two separate worlds, but Fate had brought them together, and Dick had now risen to grapple bravely with Fate.

It was Coco, the much-maligned, ingenuous Coco, the plague of Mrs. Walker's life, who finally brought the heroes together. The Nipper, it appears, had been delivering meat, and had for a moment set down his basket for the purpose of inducing a friend to listen to reason in his own amiable way. Coco, as usual, was looking for something to eat, and discovered the excellent joint in the basket. He got little time to enjoy his spoil, for the Nipper was almost immediately upon him, and Coco suffered so severely that Dick felt that in honour he could not overlook the offence. The ugly Coco was dear to Dick's heart, and any injury inflicted upon him was done to his master.

On the instant a challenge was issued, and on the instant accepted; almost before Dick knew what he

had done he was committed to an undertaking from which he could not withdraw, and to which he looked forward with some anxiety. The Nipper was older by a year and taller by half a head. He was hard as nails, quick as a terrier, and game as a cock. He had weight, and size, and skill, and a length of reach that was positively terrific.

For the two days which intervened between the throwing down of the gage of battle and the actual conflict, Dick was haunted by the thought of his enemy's close-cropped head, swinging arms, and cheerful grin. He never lost heart, but he felt that he was in for a tremendous licking. Before he went to sleep he would go over every incident of the coming fight a thousand times. He could see himself standing up and taking his punishment like a man; he could see himself endeavouring to get inside the Nipper's reach, trying every trick he knew, and going down like an ox. In after years Dick used to admit that he was in a horrible funk for two days and nights, and that it was the best lesson of his life.

But now, on the threshold of the great fight, you could not judge from Dick's manner that he was in any way concerned as to the issue. He was outwardly as cool as a cucumber. He took off his coat and waistcoat, and rolled up his shirt sleeves with the slow deliberateness of a veteran. No one knew but himself with what swift and heavy strokes his heart was pounding against his ribs. He saw everything distinctly, but he saw it as in a dream. He saw the Nipper divesting himself of his long-tailed

coat, and swinging his arms to test their suppleness; he saw that worthy's friends patting him on the back, and the blue-kerchiefed stranger giving him certain directions as to how to use his hands. He saw the sun—how small and near and round it looked—sinking in the winter sky beyond Hawhead, the gables of the Grange lifting above the fir-trees, the sweep and swell of the downs, and a donkey cart travelling slowly upon the heath road along the common. To his last days the whole scene was engraven on his memory.

It did not take long to arrange the preliminaries; the gladiators were to fight to a finish. Almost before Dick had time to draw a deep breath he was standing face to face with the foeman he had so long desired to meet and overcome. As his hands went up instinctively a change came over him; his stout little heart gathered itself together, and he began his work like the artist that he was without a thought of anything but his delight in his work.

Men fight because they are brutes; boys fight because they like it, and it is their natural way of evincing superiority.

Dick and his opponent soon began to enjoy themselves with amazing zest. Both knew that it was a great occasion. Both were determined to throw no chance away. It was beautiful to see the way in which they set themselves to work—the wary old hands—both sparring for an opening. Here and there they dodged about, now retreating, now advancing, and neither giving the other a chance of

getting in a blow. Dick was the nimblest on his feet, but the Nipper was a caution with his hands. He had not won his reputation for nothing, and Dick had all his work cut out for him.

But the Nipper was the cooler of the two—Dick could never play the Fabian game. At last his natural impetuosity got the better of him. Trying a little trick he had found successful a score of times before, he gave the Nipper his looked-for chance. That veteran was not wanting, and before Dick knew how it was done the blood was running from his nose, he had seen a thousand stars, and was lying prostrate on his back.

But he was on his feet in a moment, and as full of fight as an egg is full of meat. Then the publican from the Nag's Head, who by virtue of his position had constituted himself a kind of umpire, intervened, and that round was decidedly to the Nipper.

The friendly hands of Stoddart major sponged the fallen champion, who was breathless but undismayed. Wise and honest counsel was poured into his ear, and when the call of time came he was as fit as ever.

Dick had learned something. He now knew how deadly was the Nipper's left, and with that knowledge he watched him like a hawk. And the Nipper was growing over-confident. It was a mistake. He tried to repeat the blow that had told before, and Dick now knew his lesson. Down went his head, and up went his right, and the Nipper caught it fairly between the eyes. That staggered him and Dick did

not give him a moment. When they had finished Dick's ears were ringing, but the face of the Nipper was streaked like a panther, and an eye was beginning to close.

This time it was Dick, and high grew the hopes of the school; loud were the voices of the youngsters, and many the congratulations of the loyal Stoddart. But Dick knew they were only at the beginning. With the eye of a generous rival he saw the Nipper was game to the core—only that he ran a little too much to fat, which perhaps came from his trade—and therein lay the hopes of the school.

Once—twice—three times they met again, and you could not have told for your life which was the better man, so equal were they on their feet. Never in the memory of the school had there been such a battle. The punishment was tremendous; the excitement reached to heaven. Closer pressed the spectators; louder grew the cries of encouragement or chagrin with each varying incident in the splendid game—only some of the smaller boys crept to the outside of the crowd and would have run home had shame permitted.

The publican and the knowing man with the jaw were divided in their opinion. The gentleman from the Nag's Head was all for the Nipper, but his friend opined that Dick would finish him.

"Look at the tyke," he cried huskily. "He's game, that's wot he is. It's blood as does it, and he's got the blood—quarts of it—and you make no mistake, my buck."

That he had blood in another sense was unquestionable, for it was running from his lips; his nose was terribly tender, and his head rang like a stringed instrument. But the Nipper was in no better case, for he had now only one eye for available purposes, and Dick had written his name large across his cheek.

But now the Nipper was beginning to show his vice. The stubborn fight was beginning to try his temper, and once he made an attempt to use his knee in the very way that Dick had heard about. No one could say what might have happened, but the clean-shaven stranger was an angel in disguise. At least he appeared to have a sense of fair play, and protested loudly on the spot, so the Nipper lost his chance, and that was trying to his temper too.

But both were very nearly done now. They swayed and staggered as they parted, and another round would settle the matter in dispute. The sky and sun were all red and swimming to Dick as Stoddart major sponged him down for the last time. His heart was leaping like a wild colt, and his lungs were pumping as though they would burst his ribs. But he threw his head back in his old disdainful way, and looked at the blood-stains on his little shirt with a feeling of honest pride. And then the Nipper and he were at it again, and Dick seemed the fresher of the two.

But that was only the artful Nipper's way; he was really waiting for the chance to get in his awful left. And Dick got it again, and was nearly settled; and

the cries, "Bravo, Dicky!" were hushed in awe-struck silence and suspense, and the gentleman of the fancy refused the odds his friend made haste to offer.

Dick kept pegging away, but his rushes now were a little wild, and his blows were spent upon the air. The Nipper was picking up; he felt his victory assured.

Just at this moment, when Dick was all at sea, a late arrival intervened. A gentleman in a great-coat had come up upon the outskirts of the crowd and stood silently watching the varying fortunes of the fight. He had been full of interest, but had shown no sympathy with either combatant. But when he heard Dick's name caught up in premature rejoicing, he moved a little nearer, until he found himself among the smaller boys congregated in the rear. He seemed anxious to escape observation, but when Dick was losing ground his feelings got the better of him, and he called out with a voice that sounded like a trumpet, "Steady, youngster, steady. Keep your head up, Dick, and let him have it with your right."

And Dicky heard him and obeyed.

But the gentleman must have been greatly interested. He had not seen a dog-cart driven rapidly along the road, and suddenly stop short, not more than twenty yards from the corner of the common; he had not seen a young lady leaping from her seat and throwing the reins upon the horse's back; he had not seen the same young lady—there was not a prettier in the county—run across to where he stood,

and he did not see her standing at his elbow as he shouted out his word of encouragement and direction. But a moment after he felt her hand upon his arm; he heard the opinion she expressed regarding him, and he saw the indignant flash in her eloquent eyes.

“You brute! you brute! Dicky will be killed. Let me go to him, I say, let me go to him.”

She tried to force her way past him toward the ring where poor Dick was all unconscious of this movement in his favour. But the stranger was not moved by the appeal—he seemed more anxious about the issue of the fight.

“One moment, my dear young lady, one moment. You will spoil it all, for he’s doing beautifully. I knew it. There!”

A great shout rent the air; the stranger removed the hand he had unconsciously placed upon the young lady’s shoulder; the Nipper went down for the last time, and the great fight of Wickham Common was over.

It’s long ago, but I remember that scene as well as if it were yesterday. How we crowded round our champion and shouted till our voices broke! How we strove to get near him to pat him on the back and so share his triumph! How we watched the unfortunate Nipper led away by his disappointed friends, and how we vowed there never was Dick’s equal since the world began! It was a day in a lad’s life, and none of us ever forgot it.

The young lady had stood hesitating for a mo-

ment, wondering perhaps whether Dick did not need her assistance, and then, apparently, she decided that he did not. But she was unable to take her leave without expressing her opinion of the person whose vigorous encouragement had already moved her wrath, and, like most peacemakers, she was very emphatic and indignant. Excitement had brought the tears to her eyes. "I don't know who you are, sir," she cried, as she turned to leave, "but your conduct is simply disgraceful. You are an odious person. A man who encourages boys to fight like that is—is—a Beast."

The stranger turned and raised his hat without a word. For a moment the shadow of a smile passed across his face—it was so faint it was almost imperceptible—but the next moment he was as grave as ever. "You are quite right, my dear young lady," he said gravely, "I am a Beast."

But she had barely waited for his reply. Her eyes fell under his steady gaze, the swift colour mounted to her cheeks, and in an other moment she flew towards the docile animal that had been standing patiently, and was soon driving at a break-neck speed down the road.

The Beast seemed a good deal interested. He did not withdraw his eyes till she had disappeared round the corner, and then, with an inaudible exclamation, he turned towards the animated throng that was clustered round the hero of the day.

Stoddart major had already repaired to the best of his ability the injuries wrought on Richard by the

Nipper's vigorous hands, and had removed the superficial traces of the conflict from his countenance, while Dick himself was resuming his coat and waistcoat with the air of a man who considers his work completely done. Then the stranger came forward, and to Dick's surprise, and perhaps a little to his consternation, took him squarely by the shoulders.

"I've got something to say to you, youngster, and I am going to walk home with you if you have got the use of your legs yet. And, look here, *fidus Achates*," he added, addressing the astonished Stoddart major, whose imagination was just then running on peace-officers—"You've done your work very well, and I don't think anybody could have done it better. You've had a great fight, and the best man has won, as he ought to win all the world over. This is Dick's day, and Dick is going to commemorate it in the right fashion. Mr. Richard Wells is going to set up such a supper as has never been seen in Wickham before, and there is going to be a general invitation to all his friends."

There was a lively interest manifested now, and the beginning of a cheer.

"Mr. Richard Wells has asked me to hand you the sum of five pounds, which I do with very great pleasure, and if there isn't enough ginger-beer to be had for the money, there's more where that came from. You've all got to drink his health, and use your hands in the same way when your turn comes."

This advice, delivered in a fashion that won the lads' hearts at once, was perhaps not all that the ear-

nest father of a family might have approved, but the sentiment was one which met with instant acceptance on the part of the young barbarians to whom it was addressed. It is right to say that Dick was altogether astonished, and was at first inclined to resent the unceremonious fashion in which he was taken captive. But the prodigal generosity of the stranger captured his imagination, and the genial and boisterous good-nature of the voice took his fancy. He suffered himself to be led away quietly by the arm, wondering a little why he had been so honoured, and feeling that it added considerably to his importance.

His new friend watched him for a little while with a human twinkle in his eye, as though he knew exactly the thoughts that were passing through Richard's mind. Then he spoke:

"Still feeling a bit groggy, my son?"

"No," said Richard, sturdily, "not an atom. I'm as fit as a fiddler, only—only—my neck's a bit stiff."

"I don't wonder. The Nipper—he's a good fellow, the Nipper, and we must give him a sovereign, Richard—got home that time and nearly settled you. It was a first-class lesson, from a first-class fighting-man, and you deserved all you got. Always keep your head up and never let out till you see where you're going. Then let them have it warm, and go right through till you finish. That's the way to come out on the top. You like to be on the top, Dick?"

"Yes," Richard confessed ingenuously, he preferred that position.

“That’s right. It’s as easy to be there as anywhere else, and a deal more comfortable. It’s only the fat-headed fellows who get underneath. Of course you are going to tell your father all about it?”

Dick felt at this point the conversation was becoming personal, and that they were treading on ground that was more or less his own property. He was afraid his father was only too likely to hear all about it without any unnecessary confession on his part. He was afraid he could not altogether depend on the Vicar’s full sympathy and approval.

“Well—no,” Dick answered with some hesitation, “I don’t think I shall. You see, my father doesn’t altogether like it, and I expect he’d give me a hiding if he knew.”

“And a deuced good thing too,” said the curious stranger cheerfully; “a deuced good thing to put pith and stamina into a chap like you. You don’t like it. It cuts like fun, but it’s soon over, and then you’ve got all round the mile—a clear sweep with no ends. Now you take my advice, Dick. Go home and tell the governor, and show him where the Nipper hurt you, and tell him Percival Colthurst was proud of his god-son. No, by the way, you needn’t tell him that, for it doesn’t come into the story, and would do you no good if it did.”

Though Dick had never seen Mr. Colthurst, he had already come to a clear conclusion in his own mind as to the identity of his new friend, for among Dick’s other friends Percival had already become a

hero of romance, and his adventures and his wealth—it is curious how that secret always leaks out—were their daily topic of conversation. His diamonds, his Chinaman, his life of mysterious retirement, filled them with wonder and admiration; and now his princely munificence put the coping-stone on the building.

“I never had very much of a father myself,” Percival went on, “but when a chap has got a good one it’s only right that he should treat him fair. You’ve a good many friends, Dick, and I’m glad of it, but your father would go a bit further than any of them. That’s all. I hate advice myself. How is the League of Blood getting on?”

Now the League of Blood had become a sore subject with Richard. Since that eventful night when the band had been sent flying in dire terror and consternation, no attempt had been made to bring about another meeting, and the confederacy had practically ceased to exist. Of course there had been a good deal of speculation as to the cause of alarm, each of the members holding a theory of his own, but on one thing all were agreed, that nothing would tempt them to revisit the scene of that awful inauguration. And they did not talk about the matter among their friends, for several reasons. Dick’s theory had been a supernatural one, but he was not wedded to it, and he was quick at seeing things.

“I did not know you had come home, sir. I suppose it was you?”

“The night of my arrival, my dear boy. That

was a tremendous programme, Dick. I enjoyed it very much, and should have liked to join you, but I felt I couldn't live up to it. You'll find it hard to carry it out."

"Oh! it's all nonsense," Dick admitted ingenuously, "only one must do something."

"That's it," said Percival cheerfully, "one must do something. But it's a great thing to know that it's nonsense. The worst of it is that most people take their nonsense seriously. That's where I made the mistake myself, Dick."

The boy looked up at the man with the great shoulders and grave face and wondered what the nonsense could have been that he had taken seriously.

"As I make it out," said Percival, "life is a queer kind of house, and you must get in at the front door or you'll never get upstairs. You've got to rap hard, or you'll never get in at all, and if you try to get in by the back door—there are plenty of back doors—you never get further than the cellar, where the dogs and fleas are. I used to amuse myself at the back door. You've got to get in at the front door, Dick, my boy."

Dick was not quite sure as to the meaning of this speech, but he thought he understood, and nodded cheerfully.

"That's one reason why I wanted so badly to wall up the Nipper, sir."

Laughter is a good deal more expressive than ar-

ticulate speech. Dick felt that he had at last met his full share of sympathy and appreciation.

"There's nothing like having a little ambition, Master Dick. It keeps the salt fresh in the blood. By the way, young man"—Percival hesitated unaccountably—"who was the young lady?"

"What young lady? I don't know any young lady."

"Why, the young lady who came to see the fight, and rounded on me for the interest I was taking in you. She must be a great friend of yours."

Richard looked incredulous.

"You are pulling my sleeve, Mr. Colthurst. I saw no young lady."

"But I have no doubt—quite a substantial young lady with an excellent flow of words. I think her eyes are grey or blue; I knew her cheeks were red, and I am sure—but you mustn't mention the fact, as it might injure my character—I am sure she called me a Beast."

The boy looked instantly relieved; a weight seemed to have been taken off his mind.

"Oh!" he said, complacently, "it must have been Pat. She would say anything, and it's just like her to call you a Beast."

"I see, if she thought I was one—a young lady gifted with candour and penetration. But Pat—why Pat?"

"I don't know," said Dick, as if he did not take much interest in the subject; "I don't take much stock of girls."

"Quite right," Mr. Colthurst answered cheerfully, "no healthy boy does. They are a nuisance, and will give you a good deal of unnecessary trouble when you are a little older. I think you are a very sensible sort of chap, Dick. But tell me who Pat is?"

"Oh, she's not a bad sort if she would only let a fellow alone—French's sister—the new doctor at Wickham. Mrs. Walker says she is a little devil."

"The breed is improving wonderfully," said Percival softly, "and what do you think?"

"Oh! I don't think about it at all. The fellows say——" here Dick flushed prodigiously, and stopped himself suddenly on the threshold of a humiliating confession.

"Well, what do the fellows say?"

"I don't think it right to talk any more about Pat, Mr. Colthurst. She can't help being a girl, and she can do most things as well as any chap, I know. You keep clear of her, that is all."

"I shall remember your advice," said Percival gravely. "But why should I keep clear of her?"

"If you don't she's sure to get you on a string. There's old Austin, and Piper, and little Jones—she's made a proper fool of him. Still, a man might do worse than marry Pat."

"I observe that you are not quite clear on this subject, Richard, my son, and I mustn't entrap you into any further admissions. No, I don't think I should look well on the same string as old Austin

and little Jones. We will avoid Pat. And now what do you say to a little dinner and a glass of beer?"

It would have been worth a crown to hear Richard relating the episode of that feast the next day. He had eaten bird's nests, and crocodiles, and all the mysterious dishes of the distant East; he had spoken with the Mongolian and handled a chop-stick; he had walked among the skins of man-eating lions, and handled knob-kerries and assegais; he had viewed heaps of diamonds, nuggets of gold, and mountains of ivory. His story was straightforward, unhesitating and unveracious. His auditors swallowed it all, and if Mr. Colthurst was an object of interest before, that interest had now increased a thousandfold.

CHAPTER VII.

A LITTLE DINNER PARTY AND AFTERWARDS.

It is sometimes a good thing to be an enigma ; it is always a good thing to be a successful enigma. People generally like the mysterious. It appeals to the imagination and flatters the inventive faculties.

Perhaps M. de Paradol traded on this weakness ; perhaps he made use of the fact without knowing the secret. In any case, he was more or less an enigma. No one knew anything of his antecedents, though it was generally assumed that he was a person of rank ; his title hung about him in a modest kind of way and was never paraded with ostentation, so that no strict investigation ever was courted or made. It was also assumed that he was the possessor of considerable wealth, and followed for amusement certain pursuits which others followed for profit. He owned a race-horse or two, and might be seen on a good many race-courses ; he was not unknown at certain fast clubs where high play was the order of the night, but so far, at any rate, there had been no scandal. It is true that he did not go much into society, but he professed that his tastes did not lie in that direction. He had a low, soft

voice, with hardly a trace of accent, very white hands, a pleasant smile, and a manner at once caressing and interesting. It is true he had his detractors, for virtue is a prolific source of envy and uncharitableness; but these were women, for the most part, and they are the worst judges of character in the world, or why should there be so many bad husbands and unfortunate wives? But it is something for a man to be canvassed even adversely by a woman—it demonstrates the fact that she finds him interesting, and M. de Paradol was certainly an interesting person. When his private history comes to be written—if anyone is ever sufficiently bold to undertake it, which is doubtful—there will be many men and women surprised to find how really interesting he was, and how many parts he played. Perhaps Mr. Christopher Ashworth might have thrown a little light on the subject, but Christopher was able to keep his own secrets carefully, and never gave a friend away till he thought he could use him no longer. At present, however, that gentleman could not very well afford to quarrel with M. de Paradol.

When the latter came down to the drawing-room on the evening of his arrival, he found the mistress of the house alone. As he entered, she laid down the book she had been pretending to read, and received him without any apparent emotion. She had never, perhaps, looked more beautiful. Her statuesque beauty was enhanced by her excessive pallor, and her simple white gown, almost unrelieved by any colour, showed her stately figure to perfection.

If M. de Paradol expected her to meet him with embarrassment he was certainly disappointed.

"You must have found the journey very tedious," she said.

"By no means" he answered, sitting down beside her. "I am an old voyager, and comfort myself with the thought of the pleasure at the end of the journey. You are very well, Madame?"

"I am always well. Have you seen my husband since you arrived?"

The Comte de Paradol smiled, and showed his fine teeth.

"Ah, no; but we do not stand upon ceremony. I knew that I should find you here—that is the pleasure at the end of the journey. You are very good to permit me to come so soon."

"I hope you will understand me, M. de Paradol. I have nothing to do with your coming. I have not been consulted."

"Ah! but you see you did not prevent me. Pardon me Madame, but I owe you an apology."

M. de Paradol had once made a grave mistake in his estimate of Mrs. Ashworth's character, and he was determined there should be no repetition of it.

"I have paid this visit chiefly that I might explain. I am almost English myself now, but I—well, I do not quite understand the English women. It is a great misfortune that I should always say what I think, that I cannot disguise myself. But that is my way. I admire the beautiful coolness of the English, but I cannot imitate them. When I admire,

I follow my instinct and admire with all my heart. When I worship—pardon me, Madame, my mouth is closed from this instant, and I will ask you to forgive me. But you must not think that I meant to offend you; it was only that I could not express myself in the right way.”

“It must not occur again, M. de Paradol. You are my husband’s friend, and I cannot forbid you this house, but while you are here I will ask you to respect me.”

“That will not be a task too difficult—do we not always respect what we worship? It is the last word, Madame. You will never have to reproach me again; only—it is all that I ask—you will allow me to call you my friend.”

Marion Ashworth certainly did not love her husband; there were times when she hated him with the intensity of a strong and passionate nature, but she had hitherto been loyal to the conventional standard of right and wrong. The tumultuous sense of rebellion which at times filled her heart had never overcome what she looked on as her duty, as she understood it. But she felt for the moment that she might be tried too far. She knew that her husband was under pressing obligations to this shameless adventurer, for so she read his character. She knew that he was anxious to retain his good will; she had not the least doubt that he was using her as one of the pawns in his dishonourable game. Her husband, for his own purposes, was permitting his friend to make love to her before his eyes, and so far had she

travelled in her estimate of her husband's character that she believed he cared very little whether his friend succeeded or failed in his dishonourable pursuit. It was not all at once that she had arrived at this conclusion. She had never laboured under any illusion, but her whole married life had been a continual revelation, and she had now arrived at that stage when she was halting to find courage, and looking for some means, however desperate, to escape from a position that was no longer possible. It is hard to say how far the fact that M. de Paradol was her husband's friend had affected her feelings towards that person. Had she met him as a stranger, it is possible his admiration might have flattered her, and his sympathy appealed to her in her isolation; but she merely looked upon him now as an enemy, and a dangerous enemy.

"I am afraid, M. de Paradol, that I have not the art of friendship. I have very few friends."

"Yes," she said coldly, "Mr. Colthurst and I are ing an old friend of Madame to-night?" There was nothing in the words, or in the tone with which they were spoken, with which she could quarrel, but she felt that there was a double meaning hidden in them.

"Yes," she said coldly, "Mr. Colthurst and I are old friends. We are distant cousins. But I thought you said you had not seen my husband——"

"Madame is quite right. But—ah! *M. le mari* mentioned the fact in his letter by way of a post-script. He is an excellent correspondent—so full of

information. And the story of the diamonds is so interesting—a page of ‘Monte Christo.’ ”

“I do not know anything about Mr. Colthurst’s affairs, and I have not seen him since he returned home. It is true that we expect him to-night.”

“A type, I am told,” laughed M. de Paradol pleasantly, “a millionaire and a hermit. We all grow so much alike that a little originality is charming. Still, it is not the way to make the most of life.”

“I do not think, M. de Paradol, we have any right to discuss Mr. Colthurst.”

“It is admitted, Madame,” he replied with a smile, “but, then, when we have not a right we assume there is a duty, and at least it is pleasant, especially when they are as rich as Mr. Colthurst. And if we cannot make use of our friends, it is hardly worth while to cultivate their acquaintance.”

At this moment Percival and her husband entered the drawing-room. For a moment she felt almost afraid to look up, and then, collecting her courage, she advanced with outstretched hands. She would not have recognised him at the first glance; he had changed far more than she had imagined. It was not merely his outward appearance that had altered. She felt instinctively there was a far deeper and more radical change, and she felt in a vague, indefinite way as if she had never really known the man who stood before her bowing over her hand. Even his voice was not the same. And herself? She wondered at that moment whether he was experiencing the same feeling of surprise, and whether he was

seeking in vain to find in her the girl with whom she knew he had left his heart. She was almost afraid to trust her voice, but Percival, who may have seen her embarrassment, placed her entirely at her ease, and M. de Paradol, always a keen observer, who was watching him carefully, could not see that his manner was not altogether natural. There was certainly no hesitation or reserve in Percival's bearing; no one could have looked or acted less like a discarded lover. He was in high spirits, and appeared altogether satisfied with himself.

Standing on the hearth-rug with his hands thrust into his pockets, he overflowed with questions about mutual friends of whom he had lost sight, and touched on his own adventures with whimsical carelessness, as if they were subject for nothing but laughter. It was only when he addressed M. de Paradol that he became a little graver. For a minute or two that gentleman seemed to give him food for reflection, and he glanced at him occasionally with an almost puzzled expression, as though he were trying to remember something which had escaped his recollection. Whether he succeeded or failed in his effort, his hesitation was only momentary, and no one noticed the trivial incident.

"That's the whole story, my dear Marion," he said with a genial laugh; "some are living and some are dead; some have gone to smash, and some have settled down like my friend Christopher. And it's only eleven years. It's a funny thing—a ride in an omnibus, M. de Paradol."

The Count did not understand. He politely regretted that the illustration was so abstruse.

"I beg your pardon. I'm afraid I'm rather a vulgar sort of fellow, and it's a cheap and vulgar sort of conveyance. I like it, though, and it's just what I mean. You see, we're all packed in together—Tom, Dick, and Harry—and we're all going the same way. Tom gets out and goes to the dogs; then Dick steps into the street, and we see him no more; and at last one finds himself alone in the corner, with the coachman on the box, and the conductor at the door. And then we step out, too, and the confounded thing fills up with other people the next journey. That's a fellow's life to the letter."

"So," said M. de Paradol, smiling, "I understand, but I prefer that each of my friends should have a carriage of his own. It is more comfortable, and one travels faster."

"If Paradol had to travel in an omnibus," said Christopher, "he would prefer to stand on the step and collect the fares at the door."

"In that case, then," answered that gentleman with his most agreeable smile, "I should see that I was not paid with promises or little notes of hand that I do not think would be met."

"I'm sure that you would see that you were paid somehow. Thank God! here's dinner at last. There's no such thing as time in this infernal house. Come, Percy, it will be like old times for you to take Marion in to dinner."

There could be no question but from some points

of view the little dinner party was a success. At least, there were no awkward pauses. Percival seemed to take care of that. He was in the highest spirits and the richest vein of reminiscence. If he had for a moment or two regarded M. de Paradol with surprise at his first introduction, he atoned for it with apparent geniality and friendliness when he addressed that personage. He even listened with equanimity to Christopher's speeches, and appeared to enjoy himself with the zest and abandon of a liberated schoolboy. His cousin had no difficulty in inducing him to tell the story of his great discovery. He delivered his page from the "Arabian Nights" as if it were the simplest narrative in the world, and spoke of his millions like a man who looked upon their possession as a colossal joke. Marion was filled with wonder at the change which had taken place in him. She could not understand his manner. She asked herself again and again was he merely acting a part, or was this a new and natural self which years of independence had developed. His extravagance of manner, his boastfulness, his wild hilarity, his candour of confession, were quite foreign to all that she had known of him, and she felt that she could no longer recognise her old friend and lover. With the quickness of a woman she saw that Paradol and her husband were endeavouring to draw him out, and she observed the readiness with which he rose to every hint, and responded to every suggestion. She wondered whether he was so short-sighted as not to be able to see this; she wondered

whether his experience had taught him nothing, and womanlike, with a woman's desire to protect, she determined to warn him. But Percival, with his head thrown back, his eyes shining and his whole manner expressive of intense enjoyment, appeared perfectly at home.

"Oh! I dare say, Paradol, he was saying, "it's all right for you. You go back to Henri Quatre—isn't that the Johnnie? You haven't slept out in the open for years, and lived on two inches of your waist belt for a week. I haven't got many friends to invite me to their dinner parties, or ask me to their houses, so you see I'm going to set up as an independent millionaire on new principles. I don't want glass houses, or servants, or fine rooms. A well-cooked chop, a little whiskey and tobacco, and my man Ah Sin, about fill the bill of my requirements. I'll enjoy myself in my own way."

"But," said M. de Paradol with a shrug, "that is the way of the barbarian. Your great riches are not wealth. Riches are for this—that you purchase——"

"There is nothing under the sun that I want, except, perhaps, occasionally a little game of euchre to keep in my hand."

"Ah, you think so, but there is much that you will want to buy presently. You have a heart and eyes. You will want to buy many things—pleasure, beauty, power—the smile of a beautiful woman. I know, I have seen. A man may be a hermit when

he is old or poor, but when he is rich—oh! it is a dream.”

“Maybe you are right,” said Percival, with apparent thoughtfulness; “a hermit is dull enough till he gets in the way of it. Still, it all depends—it’s a matter of choice. If it were a matter of necessity, now—I’ve seen the poor devils at Cayenne, Marion—you’ve never seen them, Paradol?”

“It is the last place in the world I desire to visit,” said the Comte, toying very lightly with his wine-glass, but I am sure your visit was instructive.”

“Very. But that sort of retirement wouldn’t suit my constitution. I must have plenty of room. When a man has a chain round his leg he hasn’t much power of choice, and the climate——”

“We all know it’s beastly,” said Mr. Ashworth. “What’s the use of talking about Cayenne? You were always a wonder for talking about unpleasant subjects, Percival.”

“I don’t think it’s so unpleasant, after all. Think of sitting here before your excellent claret, my dear Christopher, and think of the poor devils broiling in that climate. The contrast ought to make any man happy.”

At least it made M. de Paradol thoughtful.

When Marion rose and went to the drawing-room Percival followed her almost at once, alleging as his excuse that he wanted to talk over old times, and that he never drank wine now. She evidently expected that he would join her, as she made room for him on the sofa beside her. For a few minutes they

talked upon trivial topics, like persons skirmishing for an opening, and then he suddenly changed the subject.

“How long have you known this Paradol, Marion?”

“Nearly a year; Christopher has known him longer.”

“Do you think he is the sort of person you ought to have visiting here?”

“That is a curious question. Why?”

“Oh! nothing—I suppose it is none of my business, but—well, do you know anything about his antecedents?”

“Not a word. And you?” She looked at him interrogatively.

“Oh, I! I never heard his name in my life before. Still, it is curious.”

“What is curious?”

“He is not a friend of yours?”

“I have very few friends now—M. de Paradol is not a friend of mine. He is a friend of my husband’s.”

“I used to think it very much the same thing, but I suppose I was wrong. However, I don’t think if I were you I should have him here more than was necessary. I’m a rough sort of fellow now, and I say what I think.”

“Is it because you do not like him?” There was a time when Marion would have been angry.

“Well, I don’t like him, and that’s a fact. But there’s something more. I don’t want you to men-

tion it, but I think I have met him before. Yes, I'm pretty sure I've met him before, though he's naturally a good deal changed."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Oh! as for that, I mayn't be very sure, but I rather think it was at a kind of seaside resort where he had gone for the benefit of his health—not a very fashionable place."

"Percival!" she cried, with a sudden flash of inspiration, "you don't mean to say that this man was a——"

"I don't mean to say anything, my dear Marion, and possibly I'm quite wrong, but it's an unfortunate resemblance. But what the dickens has he to do with Christopher? And what is he doing here? It's very amusing."

"Is it necessary that we should talk about M. de Paradol, Percival?"

There was a tone, a pathetic, tremulous tone, in her voice that made him start. The firelight was shining full on her face. For three days, in spite of herself, she had been looking forward to this interview with almost a girlish eagerness—an eagerness she had strenuously suppressed, and of which she had been ashamed. She had loved Percival Colthurst, and she knew now that she still loved him. She had never loved her husband; she had married him in a paroxysm of self-sacrifice, and she now almost hated him. Years of ill-treatment and neglect had driven her into revolt against him, and now the past, with all its young hope and love and sweet

dreams, was again beside her. She now knew how little she had changed in feeling, and she was not sure at the moment whether she was glad or sorry.

The eloquent pathos in her eyes touched Percival. He read her at a glance, and he knew that the woman before him was his to hold or release as he pleased. There was a time when he had loved her passionately—a time when her love had bounded his whole horizon. But many things had occurred since then; the world had hardened and knocked all the fine sentiment out of him. The woman had proved faithless, and taken the side of the man who had wronged him. He was incapable now of cherishing illusions about any woman. And yet, the look in her eyes troubled him; the pathetic appeal lurking in their depths gave him a sense of uneasiness. He was forced to confess that he hated her husband. He had returned to England burning with a vague desire to exact summary vengeance, and imagining that, perhaps, he might be able to strike the man who had wronged him through his wife. He had liked the thought—it was purely savage and barbarian. It would be a piece of splendid retribution. But he was not so sure now. He might do all that he had proposed and carry out his scheme, but would he attain the end he had in view? He had seen enough to know that Christopher had no affection for his wife, and her loss would give him little trouble. But there was something more. Her pleading look had awakened memories in his heart that he had thought were dead. The passionate fire of his

first love had long since burnt itself out, but the memory of it was not so bitter as he had imagined. He thought he had done with sentiment, and yet—had the rolling stone tumbled round the world to find it was still unchanged? At the sound of her voice, in the presence of her eyes, the eleven years of toil and hardship seemed to disappear, and he was sitting by her side again a truthful boy of twenty-two. A woman can certainly play the deuce with a man's resolutions. But whether he was in love still with the woman, or in love only with the memory, he was filled with compassion as she spoke. He had intended to use her as a pawn in his game; he had intended to strike Christopher through the wife of his bosom, and now there was a sudden revulsion, a complete change of feeling that he could not understand.

"Upon my word, Marion, I don't know why I should talk about Paradol at all. I suppose it means I am always making an ass of myself, and talking about things which are no concern of mine. I dare say I'm quite mistaken and never set eyes on him in my life before. Still, it's as well to look out and—well, you needn't mention it to Christopher."

"I do not think Christopher would care."

"I suppose not," Percival answered pleasantly. "It's a matter of taste, and perhaps it's in the blood. We both always loved black sheep better than white ones. Still—well, a man's wife is a little different, perhaps."

"That will depend upon the man. You ought to know my husband."

"I used to think I knew him tolerably. But I didn't quite expect—you see—when a man is left a tidy sum of money and marries and settles down, one imagines he is going to live up to his opportunities. I expected to find Christopher member for the county, regular at Quarter Sessions, and—but he's not so much changed as I expected."

"You mean that you do not think he is changed at all."

"Well, I can still recognise him, and that's the fact. But I've no right to discuss Christopher. Tell me something about yourself, Marion."

"Am I not everything you had expected to find?"

"I am not sure that I thought much about the matter at all. Of course, I hoped that you were happy and contented, and all that—but—I was always a blundering fellow, Marion—somehow things are different."

"So you think I am not happy?"

"Oh! I didn't say that, but——"

"Have I not everything to make me happy—Christopher for a husband, men like M. de Paradol for friends? Oh, yes! I have everything to make me happy. You should be glad, for I owe everything to you."

Percival felt that he was perilously near the edge of tragedy, and he was not quite at ease. He was not prepared for so sudden and swift a march of events, and he was not quite sure of his own feel-

ings. Marion used to be calm and collected enough; he would never have imagined that she could be guilty of this weakness, but one never knew what a woman might do. And to accuse him of being the cause of her marrying Christopher! He could not see how that event flowed naturally out of his wrong-doing.

"Men forget things," she went on, "more easily than women do. Perhaps they don't care so much; but if a woman has no future to look forward to, she must live in the past. I have never been allowed to forget, Percival."

"There are some things a man doesn't forget, either," he said, thinking rather of the husband than of the wife.

"Then you have not altogether forgotten?"

"I have a very good memory, Marion, and I have not forgotten that we were friends."

Perhaps she had expected that he would make use of a stronger word; at least, she glanced at him with an air of disappointment.

"Yes," she said, after a pause, "we were friends, and I hope you will still be my friend, Percival. I do not know why I am talking in this way to you, but I have been ill and I have been tried—you are the only friend I can trust. Do you know, Percival, that M. de Paradol has come here to make love to me, and that Chris—my husband knows it?"

"Good God," cried Percival, "you are joking. I can't believe that."

"It sounds very dreadful, but I am getting used

to the atmosphere. I suppose a woman does, in the course of time. But sometimes—sometimes I think I shall choke. And the world says a woman must go on and live and bear without a murmur, till—till she dies. Is there nothing for me to do? Can you do nothing to help me, Percival?"

"In Heaven's name, what can I do? I can break every bone in his body, if that is any use——"

"I am not sure that would help me. When I heard you were coming—— Tell me why you came, Percival. Why did you accept Christopher's invitation?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because I should like to know."

"Well—I'm not sure. I wanted to see Chris and you—I never was much of a hand at motives."

"The good Christian," she said bitterly. "He has forgiven his enemies. Do you think that Christopher has forgiven you?"

"I didn't know that I had ever done him an injury. I used to think the shoe was on the other foot."

"There isn't anyone who hates you like the man who has injured you. And you came here to meet M. de Paradol? Perhaps you can guess why?"

"I have enjoyed meeting Paradol, at any rate," said Percival grimly. "That's the sort of thing I can understand. I can play with M. de Paradol for all he is worth, as long as you don't come into the game. Oh! I understand Christopher and Paradol, and wouldn't give a snap of my fingers for a regiment of them. I can euchre them every time. But

you—you are different, Marion. I declare to God I am a poor sort of fellow, but what you tell me is perfectly terrible. I've been among the husks in my time, but this is beyond my comprehension. What can I do?"

"At first I thought you might—now, I am afraid you can do nothing. I must go on and bear."

"But you will do nothing of the sort. I may be changed, I know I'm changed, but I haven't forgot the old happy time. I used to feel bitter about you, especially at first, but I haven't forgotten. And if my old sweetheart cares to remember——"

If at a time like this a man would only exercise a little control over his feelings, a great many regrets and unpleasant consequences might be avoided. Percival had the first throb of an approving conscience that he had felt for many a day, and almost imagined he was performing a duty when he placed his arm round his cousin's wife and kissed her on the brow and lips. But he knew even then that Love was something different.

CHAPTER VIII.

SPEAKS OF THE PROCESS OF SKINNING THE LAMB.

WHEN Percival had closed the dining-room door and left his cousin and M. de Paradol together behind him, the latter turned in his chair and snapped his fingers with a significant expression. The gesture might have meant several things. It might have meant that the Comte was setting an imaginary enemy at defiance. It might have signified unspeakable contempt, or it might have indicated the certainty of easy victory, or, indeed, it might have meant all these. He had been exercising a good deal of control over himself during the whole evening, and had not been nearly so brilliant or amusing as usual in consequence. There were reasons why he was anxious to understand Percival thoroughly. He always provided himself with a map of the enemy's country, and he was the last man in the world to accept Christopher's estimate as accurate or complete. If Christopher was right, the millionaire was merely a milch cow with a bovine understanding; but, then, the excellent Christopher was frequently mistaken. If Christopher was wrong, it was hardly worth his while to lose his time; and M. de Paradol, being of

an energetic nature, time was of the essence of most of his undertakings.

At first he had thought Christopher was right; then that he was wrong; and, finally, he was not very sure whether he was right or wrong. There was one thing especially which troubled him. Had this barbarian meant anything by his reference to the excellent establishment at Cayenne, or was it merely a wild splash in the ocean of talk without further meaning or suggestion? He was inclined to think, on first thoughts, that it was a direct challenge, but on consideration he came to the conclusion that nothing was intended. Certainly impossible; the idea was absurd, and M. de Paradol surveyed his well-groomed figure reflected in the glass opposite him with pardonable satisfaction. It was not to be doubted; the man was a stupid blunderer, intoxicated by his good fortune, and as eager for flattery as a woman. Perhaps not quite a fool—no, decidedly not a fool in some ways—but not exactly the match for M. de Paradol when it came to a matter of business.

So the Comte snapped his fingers, with his mind perfectly made up upon one important point, and then he turned to Mr. Ashworth, who had been watching him with some interest.

"I suppose," he said, flicking the cigarette ash from the sleeve of his coat, "it is all right. There is no doubt?"

"What is all right? What is the doubt about?"

"My friend, you are sometimes a little enthusias-

tic—what do you call it?—exalted. Your feelings carry you too soon to the end. We have the word of your friend that he is very rich—an Astor, a Rothschild, which you will, but we have only his word. And, then, he may not be so very rich.”

“You needn’t trouble yourself about that, Paradol. I wish to Heaven I had a tenth of it.”

“My friend, you are so often mistaken.”

“At any rate, I am not mistaken this time. It’s Percival Colthurst all over the world to brag and bluster and boast, but I never knew him blow his trumpet unless he had a tune to blow. Besides, I had it straight from the Vicar.”

“Ah!” said the Comte sententiously, “a clergyman. They are the most estimable people in the world, and the most unreliable.”

“Well, I am not strong on the Church myself, but you can believe what Wells says. He’s a good judge of stones—there’s not a better in the City of London—and he told me there was a hundred thousand pounds’ worth in that confounded leather bag if there was a penny.”

“That is a very pretty sum,” said the Comte, with a thoughtful smile. “A fourth part of it would conduce to your peace of mind, my excellent Christopher. It is unjust, monstrous, unpardonable. This bear wallows among diamonds, and we—you, my friend—you know Moses will not renew the bills.”

“Moses be d——. You are not treating me well, Paradol. You have had a good deal of my money yourself. I believe you have had more of it than

anybody else, if the truth were known, and you won't go out of your way an inch to help me."

"You do not excel in gratitude, my Christopher. I have gone very many inches to help you. I don't know if by chance you are of the knowledge how much money you owe your humble servant?"

"Much or little, we have come to the end of the journey. You will never get another penny out of me. I'm stony broke."

"A temporary embarrassment," cried the Comte airily; "we no not despair till we die, and for Moses—do not fear that a way will be found. And now let us return to our mutton—I mean this sheep with the golden fleece."

"What sheep?"

"You are dull, my friend, obtuse. I mean the sheep you have brought me here to help you to shear."

It must be admitted that there were occasions, rare, indeed, and of infrequent occurrence, when the Comte could look very ugly.

"I didn't know you put it in that way. I suppose it's the truth, anyhow. I must get money some way, Paradol."

"Ah! that is the right note, the true spirit. Do not fear we shall march. Some men have money and no brains, and some men have brains and no money. Then the man with the brains meets the man with the money, and the brains collar the money. *Vive la guerre!*" But this plantigrade millionaire he is not without intelligence."

"I used to be able to turn him round my finger, anyway, and I don't think he has changed much."

"I am not sure," said the Comte thoughtfully. "I do not like his eye. It is too steady for a fool, and too clear—but, *mon Dieu*, a hundred thousand pounds!"

"Carried about in a bag like a sample," Christopher added with emphasis.

"It is what you call a dispensation of Providence. It might be a great campaign, but ah! then you want a plan, and perhaps a great general."

"I think we can manage if we go the right way to work. I have great hopes of you, Paradol, when it comes to a question of money."

"I have succeeded more than once," his friend admitted, "when one more *maladroit* might have failed. What would you have? It is a beautiful game. I give my mind to it and then it travels. You study, you plan, you work, you know your man, whether he is weak, whether he is strong, and then you come in with a rush, lift the spoil, and things are not as they were before. There are always two things—you must know—you want intellect and confidence. Until one does that he does nothing."

"It is not hard to know Percival, at any rate. I knew him pretty well once upon a time. I picked him clean enough."

"That is the one thing I cannot understand," said the Comte, meditating.

"What?"

"That he should have forgotten your kindness and forgiven you so fully."

"That is only because you don't know him yet."

"Yet I do not believe much in forgiveness."

"I don't think you believe much in anything. Hang it all, Paradol, give me some credit for a little perception. I ought to know Percival Colthurst like a book. Of course, he has put on some airs since I knew him, but, for all that, he is not a bit changed. He will still believe any story I tell him, and he'd still go blind with his last sovereign on the card he fancied. Do you know that he and that beastly Chinaman he lives with actually pass the evening playing euchre," and then Christopher told the story of the hand of cards that Percival had played by himself.

M. de Paradol was intensely interested, and remained for some moments in silent cogitation.

"Oh!" he said at length, "that is a curious story. Have you no idea what stake he was playing for?"

"I have an idea that it was an invitation for me to cut in, but I wasn't such a fool. We'll have a little game by and by, Paradol—I hope a profitable little game."

"Chut! You are not very wise, my dear Christopher. The man who has been grubbing the dirt for ten years will not let you spoil him with the little pasteboards. That is a simple sort of wisdom. You may play cards, but you must not win—no, he will win your money; that is, he will win my money. A little bait for the little trap—no more."

"I hope you won't object to my helping him to make a little book, at any rate. He used to think he knew something about a horse."

"I am not sure you would succeed. No, no, my friend, we do not dig a gold mine with toothpick. Trust me, we shall make a coup. There never was any man in this world so rich that he would not like to be richer. He would add to his wealth a thousand times."

"I suppose you have some sort of idea, but I don't follow you."

"You will understand in a moment. When we have prepared the ground, then, my friend, we shall sell him a concession in Paraguay."

The idea tickled Christopher immensely, and he at once declared that it was an inspiration of genius such as his friend alone was capable of in his choicest moments. The concession in Paraguay was magnificent, and would suit Percival down to the ground.

When he came into the drawing-room, perhaps a little flushed and unsteady, he could not help asking his cousin whether he knew anything about the climate of that country, and it was only on his catching M. de Paradol's eye that he reluctantly dropped the subject. At eleven o'clock he insisted on driving Percival home in the dog-cart.

CHAPTER IX.

PAT HAS A PROPOSAL AND AN INTRODUCTION.

HER brother thought Pat French the most charming girl in the world, and there were others of the same opinion. Other men may think a girl charming and it may go for nothing; but when her brother is of that mind, the fact deserves consideration. She must at least have some qualities that one can live with.

When Dr. John French bought the practice and settled down at Wickham, he had at first entertained grave doubts regarding the wisdom of installing his sister as the head of his not very flourishing establishment. He had not seen her for some years, and when she returned from school in Switzerland a grown-up young woman of eighteen, the grave physician was a good deal startled and taken aback. Pat—the frowsy, lanky Pat—had turned out a beauty, and a beauty with a will and spirit of her own. She startled him by the extravagance of her vivacity; she bewildered him by the number of her accomplishments. There was nothing she seemed unable to do. She rattled the crazy piano till even he understood the joke; she sang French songs; she performed

skirt dances with tempestuous grace; she broke the knees of his pony, and smashed the shafts of his dog-cart. And, finally, she bound him hand and foot, and established herself triumphantly.

There was no help for it. The wild, beautiful girl had no other protector. He could provide her with no other home. He shuddered to think what a staid doctor's household, conducted upon frugal lines, must become presided over by such riotous grace. When he saw her boxes carried up the staircase and handed her the keys, he felt that a crisis had arrived in his professional life, and he wondered how long it would last.

But he never was more mistaken in his life. He admitted to himself that Pat was a marvel. She would tramp eighteen miles and come home with her beautiful face brown and blistered, and her clothes splashed with mud. She would occasionally break out and drive poor Simpson to a standstill, but he was forced to confess she had all the fine gifts of a housewife. He got his meals now; he had clothes he could wear; he became accustomed to sundry hitherto undreamt-of luxuries, and his income seemed to have acquired twice its spending power. And Pat did all this—Pat, who was always gay, debonnaire, and inclined for a frolic. She astonished him continually. There was no one like Pat under the sun. There was no other girl so handsome, so full of pleasant humour; nay, more, she was the one woman he had ever met in his life with a touch of humour.

Miss Patty, it is to be feared, took her brother's partiality as a matter of course, and acted with a very high hand. When Mrs. Block's children had the measles—and there never was a more unpleasant person than Mrs. Block—Patty had no right to bring home the baby who was ill of bronchitis, and instal the cradle in the corner of her brother's study. It is true she sent the terrific infant home perfectly cured—there was that to be thankful for—but she had won the gratitude neither of Mrs. Block nor her brother. Indeed, the latter confessed that that was the worst of Patty. There was not a stray dog, or homeless cat, or half-mothered or motherless infant, that did not appeal to her and impose on her good nature to an absurd extent.

There are ugly women in Ireland—I suppose there are uglier women in Ireland than anywhere else in the world, especially in the north of that curious country—but the purest types of beauty—Greek, and more than Greek—are to be found around the western seaboard. Tall as a daughter of the gods, with elastic grace, and symmetry of movement, eyes grey with the blue-grey of the western seas, lips sweet and tender for love, and a forehead broad for thought, there is a charm and loveliness among these western women that is not to be found elsewhere in the world. Pat's glass confessed that she had a share of this beauty, though she herself was hardly conscious of it, yet, I am sure, would not have cared to hear you say that she was plain. The ladies in the parish held up their hands

at Pat for the most part. There was a wonderful unanimity among them upon the point, that it was a matter for regret that the poor girl had no mother to look after her, but they could never understand what wonderful attraction men found in her, from the youngest to the oldest. It was perfectly absurd, but men never had any sense, and never knew anything about a woman till they married her.

“Look!” they would say, to give point to this feminine indictment, “look at Mr. Piper. He is a very good example of what fools men are able to make of themselves. Before he fell a victim to Patty French he was a perfect darling—the very nicest curate we ever had in Wickham, and so very High-Church. He did everything, and did everything beautifully. He got up picnics, he played tennis, he went out every afternoon, and now he goes nowhere, and actually blushes when she comes into church. People say he does nothing now but write poetry, and spends every night by himself playing on the flute. Is it not a shame? And it is all on account of that odious Patty French.”

Poor Mr. Piper! But there was another side to the question, there was Mr. Piper from Patty’s point of view. Now the young lady had a very poor opinion of men in general, but she felt that at some distant date it would probably be her duty to have to make a selection among them, and fulfil her feminine destiny by selecting a husband. She could not fail to observe Mr. Piper’s state of mind or divine his intentions, and there were weak moments when she

felt flattered by his devotion. Unlike many young women, the curate did not fall within her category of heroes; but it is not unpleasant to be admired by a man whom other women admire, and perhaps this was the reason she occasionally gave Mr. Piper faint reason for hope. And then his weakness appealed to her. There was a pathetic side to the picture, and she sometimes regarded him as she regarded Mrs. Block's baby. But, for the most part, she looked on Mr. Piper as a nuisance, and in her strong and decisive way would express the opinion that men were good for nothing.

This was especially her state of mind on the particular night of Mr. Ashworth's little dinner party. She was sitting up late waiting on her brother, who had gone out to visit a bad case and did not expect to return till after twelve o'clock. All her household duties were long since finished, and the novel she was reading afforded her very little comfort, for Pat, as a literary critic, had a very poor opinion of the modern novel. She had no patience with the hero who was generally a mixture of emotions without morals, and for the heroine—she usually felt that that lady had been lost for a caning in her youth. Her criticism was jejune, but it had the merit of sincerity. Pat was not quite her gracious self; she had had a very trying evening. She was not generally introspective, but to-night she was sitting on the judgment seat arraigning her own conduct. The occasion was more or less important, as the case might be, for she had just received her first

proposal—a proposal full, adequate, and unmistakable. She believed, though she was not very sure, that she had declined the offer in terms equally unmistakable—at least, that had been her intention—but she was wondering whether there had been anything in her own conduct which had given her suitor hope of success. She had never dreamt of love; she had a colossal contempt for flirtation; she would as soon have thought of marrying the man in the moon as of marrying the Rev. Atherton Piper, and yet—yet she must have given him some encouragement or he would never have ventured—and had she really made her refusal sufficiently clear? The latter was really the important point, but the former troubled her.

Mr. Piper had called at five o'clock. There had been a choir practice which Pat sometimes attended, though I am afraid with no great regularity, as she had no vocation for church work. Mr. Piper knew—there is a method in love, as in most other things—that he would find her alone at this hour, and he was really anxious to know why she had not been at the choir practice. When he called, therefore, he had a substantial reason to assign for his visit. But perhaps Pat was not so easily deceived, and perhaps she thought he might call, and the best and strongest women are sometimes a little inconsistent.

He was a small man beside the goddess on the hearth-rug, but his manner was expansive and sympathetic.

“Really, Miss French, you ought to have been

with us, you know. Everything went so well. The anthem was splendid and the new soprano sang charmingly. She has a beautiful voice."

"I thought she would," Pat said carelessly, "she is so plain. You told me yourself she was ugly."

"Oh! I don't think I quite said that, now," said Mr. Piper, with some fear of having to answer for his language in the future, "but I admit—well, the truth is, we all have our gifts."

"I wonder what mine are," said Pat, breaking her wool impatiently. "If I have any gifts, I haven't discovered them yet."

"There are some people whose gifts are all graces," was the diplomatic and tender answer.

"That's nonsense," Pat asserted with decision. "There is no use in talking to me in that way."

"It is so hard to know how to please you best."

"That is exactly what I complain about. When men talk to a woman they say what they think will please her, and they all seem to think she is pleased with nonsense. If I were a man——"

"That is a funny thought, Miss Patty. What would you do?"

"Well, I shouldn't talk nonsense. My brother John never does. And I don't think I should be a clergyman—well, I don't mean exactly that—but clergymen are sometimes so curious."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, Miss Patty, for I hope——"

"It is not very wrong to be curious, and other people don't see it like me. I can't help it, you know,

but if I were a man I don't think I could endure mothers' meetings and Sunday-school entertainments."

"They are a fag sometimes," Mr. Piper confessed, ashamed of his cowardice, "but somebody's got to do them, and when there is no lady in the parish—really a parish without a lady, I sometimes tell the Vicar, is like a man without hands."

"The want of hands might sometimes keep a man out of a good deal of mischief," said Pat, as though she had considered the subject. "If he didn't do much good, he couldn't do much harm. By the way, Mr. Piper, I have found the lair of that old fox that gave the Clifton hunt so much sport last year. And I'm almost certain there are a couple of cubs."

But Mr. Piper was not much interested in the old fox or the cubs.

"Dear me," he said, "that is quite wonderful, really wonderful, you know."

"What is wonderful?"

"That you should have found it out by yourself. What a lot of walking you must do! It must be very lonely sometimes."

"Not a bit. I enjoy it more than anything, and John is so busy he can't go with me much now."

"But if you had a pleasant companion; it adds so much to the delight of a walk and creates so much interest."

"I couldn't be bothered with anyone else I know."

"You have never tried me, Miss Patty," he said, with a sudden flush. He felt that he had risen to the

occasion with a throb of desperate courage. The drift of the conversation up to this time had not been encouraging, and he felt somehow they had been getting further and further from the tender ground towards which he wished to lead her. He had not said much now, perhaps but he had made a step in the right direction, and the poor man had a fine spirit when it was aroused. He was determined at all costs to persevere, though it was terribly trying to have to speak so plainly.

“You have really never tried me, Miss Patty.”

The young lady found the idea exceedingly amusing.

“You!” she cried. “Why, I should walk you off your legs in half an hour. When I am in good form I like to go like an express train. And I don’t think really you are very fond of walking.”

“That is because I have no one with whom I care to take long walks. You can’t walk without sympathy and companionship and common interests. But with you—you don’t know how delighted I should be. And you don’t know, Miss Patty, how—how lonely I feel sometimes.”

“I don’t know why a man should ever feel lonely at all. He has always plenty to do.”

“That is because you are not a man. But if you were in my place you would see the difference. Just look at my position.”

Patty began to look as though she saw the position and did not enjoy the prospect.

“I haven’t a relation in the world except an aunt

at Exeter. I haven't a home except my lodgings with Mrs. Block, and you can imagine how dull and cheerless they are. At college I didn't mind, but now, when I sit down for the evening by my solitary fire, I feel as if I hadn't a friend in the world. You can't live all the time with your books; you want some society; some one to love and cherish and—and some one who will make your life fuller and grander and sweeter with hope and joy."

He had got the speech by heart and poured it out like an inspiration. He really spoke it very well; so well that Patty felt a little towards him as she had felt towards his landlady's baby. He saw the impression he had made, and the sight gave him a new access of hope and courage.

"I know you aren't like other girls," he went on. "They treat me seriously and you only laugh at me, and sometimes you say hard things behind my back."

"I really never meant anything I said," she answered penitently. "And I didn't know that you cared much about walking. But I'm sure it wouldn't answer; people would be certain to say ill-natured things. They always do about a girl."

"I shouldn't care about all the world," he cried, putting his foot inadvertently on his soft hat which he had laid down beside him.

"Not the Bishop?" said Pat.

Her quick eyes had caught sight of the accident, but something—a sense of atmosphere, a touch

of sympathy—prevented her from drawing his attention to the fact.

“The Bishop! You are jesting with me again. You never will treat me seriously.”

“I should treat you seriously if I took you for a walk across Gorham Heath and round by Shagley. That is a good day’s work.”

She was anxious to change the personal note as far as possible. She had a feeling that there was only safety in the neutral ground of the impersonal. But Mr. Piper had forgotten his reserve, and was desperately in earnest. For a person of his dimensions he really showed wonderful spirit.

“Now, Miss Patty, I do implore you not to treat me in that way. It is not fair; you never give me a chance of saying what I want. And you know very well what I want to say. You must have seen my conduct for more than—since last Easter.”

“You have not made yourself very agreeable since then. I used to think you were very good fun, Mr. Piper, but you have changed entirely.”

“When a man is as much in earnest as I am,” he said desperately, “he is not usually very good fun. Miss Patty, you know very well what I’m trying to do.”

“I think you are trying to make love to me,” said Patty, “and I don’t like it.” She thought at the moment of having heard some one say there was a wise policy of being cruel to be kind, and she tried to practise it. But her lover was too far committed to pay attention to her words.

"I'm trying to ask you to marry me, and that's the truth. I know I am not a very good match now, but I'll get a parish some day, and—and I love you so much that I can't eat or sleep or do my work."

The poor little man was so much in earnest—and he was really a very nice little man when he was in his right mind—that Patty felt she could not pursue the drastic policy she had adopted in all its rigour. She felt that she must soften the blow by degrees, after all. Besides, it was her first proposal.

"It's very good of you to say that, but don't you think it's very foolish?"

"I know it's foolish, but I can't help it, indeed I can't."

"I don't exactly mean that. I'm sure I should never make a wife for a clergyman."

"You! You would make a wife for an angel," he cried, becoming terribly heterodox in the tumult of his emotion. "You don't know how lovely you are, Patty, how sweet and tender. Every other woman is only common clay beside you."

"But I have never thought of marrying anyone. It's very kind of you to ask me, I'm sure, and—and I like you as well as anyone else, but I never intend to marry."

"Oh! every girl says that," he said earnestly, "but they all change their minds afterwards. I don't expect you to love me much at first, but we'd manage if you would try by degrees. I should worship the ground you trod on, and you—you will get used to it, indeed you would. I know, perhaps, I'm not the

sort of man you—that is—well, some girls fancy, but think I have some good points——”

“I like you very much,” said Pat, “but——”

“That’s a beginning, at any rate. I am certain everything will come right in time. You don’t know how happy you are making me, Patty.”

Patty began to wonder whether she would not find herself engaged in spite of herself.

“But, Mr. Piper, you do not understand. I don’t love you in the least.”

“I know you don’t love me just now. Love doesn’t always come in a moment, but it grows, and keeps on growing. That is the sort of love that wears longest, and is the best in the long run. You have told me you like me, and that is enough for the beginning. Indeed, I never expected more. I don’t want any formal engagement now—at least on your side, unless you would prefer it, but I consider myself no longer free from this moment. I never knew what it was like before, and I am so happy.”

He was so happy that he tried to take Patty’s hand, but the effort was by no means successful.

“I don’t think I have said anything to make you happy,” she said coldly, for the attempt to touch her had filled her with resentment. “I have only said I didn’t love you, and I have no thought of marrying. It’s very good of you to think of me, and I suppose I should feel flattered, but——”

“I don’t want you to say any more,” he cried. “I know exactly how you feel. I should feel the same way if I were in your place. But it will come, and

in a fortnight, when I ask you again, you will see how different everything will be."

"It won't make any difference," Patty said firmly.

But it was no use. Patty might be rock, but her suitor was adamant, and when he took his departure she hardly knew whether she was not engaged in spite of all her protests to the contrary.

After he had gone she sat down and resumed her work, half perplexed and half angry. Then the humour of the situation struck her, and she burst into a fit of laughter so genuine and unrestrained that the tears almost rolled down her cheeks. The idea of marrying Mr. Piper of all the men in the world was extremely comic, and she wholly forgot the pathos in the humour of the moment.

"His riverince must be a great joker intirely," said Bridget, ~~"said her mistress, who spoiled her maid.~~

on the departure of the visitor.

"His reverence never saw a joke in his life, Bridget," said her mistress, who spoiled her maid. "Saints don't joke."

"Then saints have a mighty quare way of carrying on the conversation."

"They are never appreciated in this world, at any rate," said Patty with decision, and Bridget returned to the kitchen feeling that Miss Patty never would make use of her opportunities, and that they were thrown away upon her.

But Patty, notwithstanding the humour of the situation, was unusually depressed and agitated. She

felt that she ought to have been firmer, and that in her desire to avoid giving pain she had, perhaps, taken the most effective way to inflict it. She had no experience of life, and her knowledge of the way these things were conducted in the romances she had read had not prepared her for an attack at once so direct and so evasive. It was really trying; the news would be all over the parish that she was engaged, and nothing was further from her thoughts. Was there ever such a donkey as she had proved herself to be? And the idea of marrying the Rev. Atherton Piper of all men in the world! Why, she could take him under her arm and walk with him round the parish. Then she laughed again as the vision of that proceeding rose vividly before her mind, but the laughter had not that gay, whole-hearted note which usually characterised it.

Time did not generally hang heavy upon her hands, but she thought that this particular evening would never come to an end. There were no household duties with which she could occupy herself; her books—Pat's taste in literature was decided, but narrow—failed to have any interest for her, and now that Bridget had gone to bed, she sat down by the fender and began, as she sometimes did, to build up the fabric of her day-dreams in the fire. But even this fascinating occupation failed to exercise its usual charm. The castles she was building were more shadowy and unreal than usual, and came tumbling down as soon as they were reared.

It was growing very late—a quarter to twelve by the clock on the mantel shelf, and something extraordinary must have occurred to detain John, for he had promised to be home shortly after eleven at the latest. She got up and went to the front door, but there was nothing to be seen but the empty road, with a slight sprinkling of snow upon it, lying white under the moon, and the clear, frosty glitter of the stars. She would have liked nothing better than to have gone out to meet her brother, but it was too late to think of that, and she returned to her chair and her book, wishing that she had not promised to sit up.

Time went. Then the shapely head began to nod, and her book, wishing that she had not promised to through her mind. Mr. Piper, in his gown and hood, was engaged in an awful struggle with the tall stranger whom she had seen that morning, and her brother was watching the contest with his instrument case open beside him. But neither of the antagonists touched the other; they spun round and round and performed the most complicated evolutions. It was a curious sight, and all the time the wedding bells were ringing—ding dong—with a faint, far-off chime. There was a crowd cheering, applauding, pushing.

She awoke with a start. Brandy, the Irish terrier, was barking loudly in the porch. There was the sound of wheels on the dry, hard road, and the swift click of a horse's feet. The sound stopped opposite

the gate. She could distinctly hear the murmur of voices, and then she heard the hurried tread of footsteps upon the path. She knew that her brother would never think of bringing a visitor at that hour; it was quite contrary to his habits. He must have met with an accident.

She was wide awake and alert in a moment. Without waiting to hear the bell, she ran to the door and threw it open. She was infinitely relieved to find her brother himself standing upon the steps.

"What is it, John? Is there anything the matter?"

"Nothing very serious, I hope. A gentleman has met with an accident, and I am bringing him in here. I know it's a nuisance, but we must do what we can. Let Bridget get the spare room ready as soon as she is able, and you had better see that there is some hot water."

Pat was always great in an emergency. In an inconceivably short space of time Bridget was roused from her slumber, the room was ready for the reception of the patient, and Pat was downstairs watching her brother helping to carry the unconscious figure into the hall.

"Everything ready, Pat? Then we will take him up at once."

Patty was about to retire, feeling that at present she could be of no further service, but just at that moment the light from the lamp fell upon the face of the injured man. She recognised him at once, and almost cried out. Instead, however, she went

away very quietly, saying under her breath, "I don't know how I knew. I was sure it was—the Beast."

But she used that uncomplimentary appellation without any feeling of its fitness.

CHAPTER X.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

PAT was sitting at the breakfast table early the next morning waiting for her brother's appearance—debonnaire and fresh as a rosebud. A night's rest had removed Mr. Piper's proposal into the region of pure comedy, and she had a hundred plans for the day. She had learned last night that her visitor's accident had not been quite so serious as had been at first anticipated, though her brother thought it might be four or five days before he would be capable of removal. Still, matters might have been very much worse, and though she might have a little more to do herself, Bridget would be quite equal to all the demands made upon her. She had herself made up her mind that she would have nothing to do with the patient. She had formed a very unfavourable opinion regarding him, and she remembered with a flash that she had expressed that opinion in no ambiguous terms. At that time she had known nothing regarding him, but what she had heard since had not tended to raise him in her estimation. Still, hospitality—even enforced hospitality—has its duties, and Pat had large and extensive views upon that subject.

Her brother, who was generally punctuality itself, made his appearance a quarter of an hour after his usual time. He was not unlike Patty in appearance, but was built upon slighter lines, and had not his sister's regularity of features.

"Late again I see, Pat," he said, sitting down at the table and removing the cover before him; "I will have to give up preaching punctuality after this, but I've been to see my patient, and done a little in the way of looking after him."

"How is he this morning?"

"He seems to be a little shaken still, but much better than I had expected, much better. He must have been made of cast-iron, for the fall would have killed half the men I know. And he really doesn't seem such a bad sort of fellow."

"If he is good for anything you will be certain to find it out."

"Oh! I am not so sure of that. I can see the sun spots as well as any one else. But from what I had heard I was rather prejudiced against him; one doesn't expect to find a large degree of perfection among Mr. Ashworth's friends. I think I told you Ashworth was driving when the accident happened."

"Yes," Patty answered, "and I thought last night he didn't seem quite so sorry as he should."

"Well, I don't know. You see he had been dining freely, and when a man like Ashworth is in that state he doesn't show his most amiable side. I dare say he meant nothing, though I must say he doesn't impress me favourably. But we won't discuss Ash-

worth. I am really interested in the man upstairs though. He is a very curious type."

"I have always noticed, John, that your curious types come to a bad end."

Her brother laughed as he helped himself to another rasher.

"I like a man, at any rate, who takes his misfortunes with a smiling face and doesn't grumble. You may say what you please, my dear Patty, but a doctor has a very good opportunity of getting under the surface, for a man hasn't much thought of playing a part when you are dancing as hard as you can on his chest."

"I suppose," said his sister with cheerful sarcasm, "that's what makes you so good a judge of character."

"I suppose it is," he assented, "but really Colthurst is a very cheerful beggar, and not by any means a fool. He is certainly not at all what I expected."

"I should like to know what you did expect."

"Oh! I don't know. I had been hearing a variety of stories, all of them with a grain of truth in them more or less—less I should imagine—and one doesn't always come to the most charitable conclusion. As a young fellow there seems to have been no doubt he was very wild, and left home in disgrace. Well, I don't mind that so very much in some cases——"

"My dear John," said Patty, expostulating.

"Of course it depends. You've got to train a tree

to keep it straight, and as far as I can make out this young fellow had no training at all. He was allowed to go his own way, and of course he got into mischief. When I heard he had come home and had shut himself up in the old house, I imagined he was soured and bitter. To tell you the truth," said John, with a sudden outburst of confidence, "I thought it was a case of the bottle."

"Perhaps you were right," said Patty, who appeared determined to hear nothing good of her guest.

"I never was further wrong in my life. If there's anything certain in his case he doesn't drink, and has been working like a nigger for years. The man's like whipcord, and his nerves are like iron."

"I never knew that that was enough to make a person a respectable member of society."

"It is a basis for a certain amount of respectability at any rate—a kind of negative test—and is satisfactory as far as it goes. But I don't like his association with Ashworth. If a man comes home to turn over a new leaf it doesn't look well to see him beginning on the old page."

"My dear John, I really never saw you so much interested before."

"I am interested, Pat, and that's the fact. One doesn't get many new types in Wickham, and this one pleases me. To be sure, I may be altogether wrong about him."

"I believe you are," said Patty, sternly. "Do you

believe it to be right to encourage boys to fight, John?"

This, then, was Patty's main grievance.

"Certainly," said her brother, cheerfully. "Under certain circumstances I consider it is exceedingly good for them. It works off a good deal of our fallen human nature in a natural and healthy boy. Boys are all the better occasionally for a good drubbing. Why do you ask?"

Then Patty told her story in a circumstantial manner, though it must be confessed she refrained from confessing that she had already intimated to the person she considered the chief offender in what estimation she regarded his conduct. It annoyed her exceedingly to find that her brother, for whose opinion she really entertained great respect, did not share her view as to the enormity of the offence.

"I can't see that there was so very much wrong, my dear Pat. If there is a young gentleman in Wickham who wants to have it taken out of him it is certainly Master Richard Wells. Oh! I know Dicky, and I know he's a favourite of yours, but it's the very medicine he requires, and I hope he got a good strong dose. A black eye is a capital thing for a boy to keep him from thinking too much of himself."

"There's no use talking to you, John. I think Mr. Colthurst has infected you already."

"Perhaps he has," was the cheerful answer, "but it's not likely we shall see much of him after a day or two. I hope his stay here won't give you any

trouble, Patty. He talked about moving this morning, but of course that is quite out of the question. I couldn't think of letting him get up."

"Of course not. We must do our duty as good Samaritans."

"Don't enquire too closely into the character of the man who fell among the thieves and was beaten," said her brother.

Dr. French departed shortly after breakfast on his usual round of visits, and Patty was left free to attend to the household tasks of the morning.

There is nothing more charming than to watch a young housewife in the discharge of her duties. Her earnestness is colossal, her forethought extraordinary, her industry indefatigable. No general commanding a division in front of the enemy is more active, more provident, or more conscious of the importance of his operations. The advance of mop and broom, the attack upon invisible outposts of dust, the ordering of the commissariat, are things which to the masculine mind do not rank with the operation of the army in the field, but to a woman these things are of equal importance to the well-being of the nation. The Angel of the Household has her own ways, and a man can only stand aside and admire.

At eleven o'clock Patty had arranged everything to her satisfaction, and looking along the whole line had come to the conclusion that her dispositions were completed for the day. She had thought out dinner, which is never an easy matter, she had dusted

the drawing-room, she had assigned Bridget her duties, and she had arranged that luncheon should be taken up to her guest at one. All these things having been done and her mind relieved, she had removed her apron and retired to the study with what she was in the habit of calling her Doomsday Book under her arm, to make up the accounts for the week.

This was always a difficult and disagreeable task, and involved a great expenditure of energy, for Patty was not great upon figures, and her addition was sometimes lamentably weak, and brought out the most surprising results upon paper. This morning her inherent weakness was complicated by the fact that she was unable to give her whole mind to the task with her usual directness and energy.

The truth of the matter was the presence of the guest in the house troubled her. She had no wish or desire to think about him at all; she disliked him exceedingly, and yet there was no doubt that she was very much interested in him. She would have liked to know something more of his history. She wondered what he had done, and how he occupied himself shut up in the Grange with a solitary servant. There must be some reason for his retirement, and at his age, too, and yet John had been more favourably impressed than she had ever known him to be by a mere chance acquaintance. Then she blushed, for there was a thought in her mind which she had never confessed to herself till this moment, but which she knew had made her very

angry. She had read a look of admiration in his eyes which he had not attempted to conceal. He had no right to look at her in that way. She had every reason to resent it, and, no matter what John might say, he was a man who should not be trusted.

That column was surely wrong somewhere. The figures would not come right, and she must go over the whole addition again. And the ink! No poor author writing for bread ever made a more horrible mess of himself. There was ink on her fingers, and a smudge of ink on the point of her nose. This was Miss Patty in her single hour of despair. Again she bent down her shapely head over the book and recommenced her task. "Nine and three and seven," then she forgot whether she had got to **twenty or thirty**, and was compelled to begin again.

It was very tiresome, but it had to be done.

Then there came a gentle rap at the door, but she was too much absorbed to hear it.

The figures—the wandering, tantalising, rebellious figures—had full possession of her mind.

The rap was again repeated, the handle was turned and the door opened a little.

Then Patty's attention was attracted, but she did not raise her head.

"I can't be bothered now, Bridget," she said, still keeping the odd halfpenny in her mind; "I have got this dreadful book to finish. Come back in half an hour if you want me."

"I beg your pardon," said a voice.

Patty dropped the fatal Doomsday Book, let her

pen fall from her fingers, and rose to her feet in indignant astonishment.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, but I was told I should find you here."

The man was so cool, so insouciant, and withal so good-humoured, that Patty felt doubly angry.

"I am afraid," he said, looking at her face, "I have done something very wrong. I am always doing something wrong, and people have always to forgive me. But I wanted to thank you, and say good-bye."

"But—but you are not going?" she said almost with a gasp, and forgetting for a moment her indignation.

"I am sorry to say I am," he said smiling, "for it's a long time since I have been made so comfortable and had so much care, and I liked it—that's a fact."

"But you can't go," she said, "you mustn't go."

"My dear young lady," he laughed, "I am going because I must."

"My brother said you couldn't rise for two days at least."

"Oh! that's it. Doctors know a good deal, but they don't know everything. I've been a good deal worse. I remember crawling twenty miles once with a broken leg, and dancing a whole night a fortnight afterwards. This is nothing, I assure you."

But his looks belied his words, and Patty saw that he was suffering even while he was speaking. Though she was still very angry, she could not re-

sist that look of pain, and her heart softened a little. Besides she thought she divined his motive in wishing to leave them.

“You did not cause the slightest inconvenience, I assure you,” she said. “We—that is my brother—was very glad to have you here, and you know very well you are still quite unfit to go.”

“Thank you. You are very good, but I know I’ve been an awful nuisance. May—may I sit down? The fact is——”

Patty had an idea that he was going to faint, or do something equally unpleasant, but a moment or two afterwards the colour which had disappeared came back to his face, and she began to breathe more freely. But she wished with all her heart her brother was at home, for she did not know in what way exactly to treat this unconventional stranger who sat in her brother’s chair, and evidently required help, which she herself was wholly unable to render.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” she said after a pause.

“Nothing in the world but forgive me,” he said, with the smile which she thought by no means an unpleasant one. “My absurd little weakness is quite gone, and I was never better in my life. You have only got to think nothing more about me, for the truth is I am not worth it, and don’t require it.”

There was a constrained silence between them.

“Dear me, it is eighteen years since I was in this room last, and it seems like yesterday.”

Pat was by no means anxious to be drawn into a conversation, and she merely answered,

“Indeed.”

“Yes—it is nearly eighteen years—in poor old Simpson’s time. I was only a lad, but I remember his black draughts and powders as well as if I had been taking them every day since. He was very kind though, and I was a very lonely little beggar.”

Pat was still armed for attack and resistance, but her first feeling of open and keen hostility had passed away, and she was attracted and interested in spite of herself. She was certain now that the man had no idea that he was intruding upon her privacy; he was so frank, so respectful, so unconscious of offence, that she had ceased to feel alarmed, and there was so genuine a ring of pathetic recollection in his last words that, womanlike, she felt she should like to know a little more. Eve had no desire for the apple as an apple; she merely wished to see what effect the eating of it would produce.

“You must have found everything a good deal changed,” she said, tentatively.

“I remember,” he said as though he had not heard her words, “poor old Simpson had a great weakness for spiders. He never would let a web be touched from one year’s end to the other, and for the ceiling—it was hung like a canopy. There was one fat fellow used to live in the corner—you don’t like spiders, Miss French, I suppose?”

“Well,” Patty confessed, “they are not among my favourite animals.”

“Still they have got to live somehow, and old Simpson used to say that a boy should spend as much time among them as possible.”

“He must have been a very unpleasant old man,” said Patty. “What good did he imagine a boy would get from spiders?”

“He had some sort of idea that there were lessons to be learned from them, and that the gastronomic tragedy of the spider providing his meals might have the effect of opening the eyes of youth. But it was a colossal mistake. Nothing does that but going through the mill yourself.”

“He must have really been a curious old man.”

“He was a good-natured, tender-hearted old brick, and many a time he gave me a good meal here—but my reminiscences are neither very interesting nor profitable.”

“Well,” said Patty, “I am not sure, but I should like to know whether your lessons were useful?”

“You mean the spiders? I don’t think they were of much practical value. You see, at the start you are not very sure what you are—you think you are the spider, and you find you are only the fly.”

“Is it quite necessary you should be either?”

“Infallibly in the world I have lived in.”

“Then the sooner you get out of that world the better,” said Patty, with decision. “It is a horrible doctrine, and must make you very unhappy. If I thought that——”

“I hope you never will think of that, Miss French. I beg your pardon for talking this nonsense, but I

have got into the habit of it and I can't help myself. Do you know that it is more than ten years since I talked to a young lady as I am now talking to you. A man forgets his civilisation in that time and becomes more or less a savage."

"But you have returned to civilisation."

"I am only a savage living among civilised people. I am afraid I shall never get out of my atmosphere, and then I think I was never more than half civilised at the best. You were quite right when you summed up my character and declared that I was—merely a wild animal."

"I know it was very improper," said Patty, "but I did not approve of your conduct, and I always say what I mean. I didn't mean generally, but in that particular matter I think you were—well—a Beast. That is the truth," she said, with smiling defiance.

Patty at once puzzled and attracted him. She appeared to him to be a type as strange as it was beautiful. There was a freshness, candour, and audacity in her language and her manner which belonged rather to the girl than the woman, but he was quick to discern that these qualities were only one part of a character singularly self-reliant. The language of the clear, steady, grey eyes, and sweet, yet strong lips could not be mistaken, and he felt—he smiled at himself as the thought occurred to him—that it was not the admiration of the girl, but the sympathy of the woman, that he should like to awaken. And yet what was there in common between him and this fresh young life that the experi-

ence of the world had not touched? Her world lay bright before her; he had no illusions and had long since ceased to dream. Yet to talk with her and watch her face eloquent with feeling seemed almost like taking up life again, and recalled to him like a note of music, like a forgotten fragrance, something he had sought after and missed.

Then, though he could not tell why the suggestion occurred to him, he thought of Marion Ashworth, and he found himself wishing that he had not been so ready to entangle himself. There was no doubt he had loved Marion with all the strength and fervour of his youth; he had idolised and worshipped the ideal—but that was eleven years ago, and now—the dream was over, the ideal was lost, and he had vowed and kissed, not because he loved his old sweetheart, but because he pitied her, and perhaps because he hated her husband. That was the entire truth. He was sorry for her, he pitied her, he would have saved her from unhappiness if he could, but the idea of returning injury for injury had in the first instance been the central and predominating motive for his conduct.

Then he burst into one of those strange fits of laughter that sometimes astonished his friends, amused to think that the girl before him should have suggested this train of thought.

“I beg your pardon,” said Patty, somewhat aghast.

“No, you are perfectly right,” Percival answered. “I like plain speaking myself. I am a Beast, and to

tell you the truth I have been thinking about it ever since. It was so honest and spontaneous, and so—so good of you to tell me exactly what you thought of me, that I had no right to be annoyed even if it were not true.”

“But I don’t think you understand me. What I meant was this,” Patty went on stoutly; “that I thought it was brutal and rather cowardly for a man who should have known better to encourage boys to fight.”

“I think,” said Percival, “I prefer the phrase to the explanation. But, indeed, you are perfectly right. For how could it be otherwise? And do you not think a Beast is sometimes to be pitied? Just look at me. Here I have been for eleven years without a friend, sometimes without a crust—to starve is no joke, my dear young lady—every man’s hand against me, hunted from post to pillar, and dropping at last on a little good fortune when I hardly care for it. I was always rather an indifferent sort of fellow, but I really think I never got a fair chance. The Vicar and old Simpson were the only friends I ever had in my life, and the only two people who ever showed me any kindness.”

He wanted to awaken the look of sympathy once more in the girl’s eyes—it was as refreshing as summer rain after a long drought.

“My father—well—I don’t believe in a man reviling his parents—but my father and I never managed to hit it off. He lived quite apart in the old house, and I suppose as a child, from one year to an-

other, I never spoke a dozen words to him. You can't wonder when I said I was a lonely little beggar. I would have given the world for a kind word, and used to envy the children I saw going past the gate to school. And the ghosts—I used to lie awake at nights and see them by the dozen. That was a fine life for a child, Miss French."

Patty was looking at him with open eyes; she did not speak.

"If you knew how I hated that old house, every room, every stone—I hate to look at it now."

"But yet you have gone back there to live. If you hate it so much——"

"Why should I have gone back there? That is a mystery, and I answer that I don't know. Perhaps it was that I had nowhere else to go, perhaps it was that I could leave when I pleased, perhaps it was because it was the last place in the world to which I should have gone. You know the puppet has got to dance when the string is pulled."

Patty was a theologian in a small way, but with clear and decided views, and the doctrine which was just enunciated was one to which, like most women, she had a very strong objection. But it was not the doctrine of which she was thinking so much just now. Her mind was filled with the thought of a child growing up among shadows, unloved and uncared for.

"I am sorry," she said, "I think it was a pity——"

"That I should have come back? I am beginning to think so too."

"No, I do not mean that. I meant that you should never have known your mother."

It may have been something in the words or the voice that moved him—it may have been the look in the clear, grey eyes, tender with pity; but, whatever it was, his face softened and he spoke in an altered tone.

"I don't remember anyone ever saying that to me before, Miss French, and I remember—long ago, that was—I used to think it every day of my life. I am not like the sort of man who would think much about things of this kind now."

"No one forgets altogether what he has loved," said Patty. "I should think if he had found the world hard he would only remember the more. I beg your pardon for what I have said, Mr. Colthurst, I think I have been too hard on you."

It was as though the girl had been thinking aloud, and so Percival understood it. He imagined he could almost see her thoughts following one another in her mind, and he felt that she was somehow studying his case in an impersonal way, as if it were a problem presented to her for solution. He could not explain it to himself, but her spontaneous avowal touched him deeply.

If he had been told yesterday that he was going to make a confidant of any living being, and especially of a woman—a mere girl he had only known for an hour—he would probably have expressed himself with force and sincerity. If he had been told that he could forget utterly the last ten years of his life

and go back wholly to the days of hope and dreams, he would have flouted the suggestion as the most improbable in the world. He could not tell how it had happened, and he did not stop to enquire. He surrendered himself to the feeling of the moment, and Patty, with her arms resting on the table, and her eyes filled with pity, listened to the long story of trial and wandering.

He told his story simply and naturally, without any desire for effect—perhaps not the whole story, for no man ever tells that—but he did not try to hide his own failings, or to exaggerate his difficulties. There were two matters, however, of which he did not speak. He made no reference to his wealth or to Marion Ashworth.

When Dr. French returned home from his morning round he was astonished to find Patty engaged in conversation with their guest regarding whom she had entertained so unfavourable an opinion, nor did he learn—it was very unlike Patty to suppress the fact—that this conversation had already lasted for two hours.

“He is a very strange fellow,” said her brother, when their visitor had gone, which he did immediately after lunch, for which he had with difficulty been induced to remain. “Perhaps he has grown unsociable from living so much alone.”

“Perhaps,” said Patty after a time, as though she were considering the subject; “we don’t understand everything. One ought to be pitied rather than blamed for his misfortunes.”

“I am not so sure,” answered her brother, smiling significantly, “that Colthurst would make a good subject for a Dorcas Society.”

And, strange to say, Patty did not enquire what he meant.

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING THE TRAP.

WHEN Percival returned home—he usually smiled when he used the word—the imperturbable Ah Sin found his master unusually irascible and hard to please. Nothing had gone right and nothing was as it should be. The room was damp and draughty, the chimney smoked, and the tobacco was too dry, the dinner had been badly cooked, and finally when he went to bed, that also had been badly made. Ah Sin could not understand his master. As a rule he was satisfied with anything and never found fault; when things went wrong he was only the more cheerful on that account, and if the immovable Celestial had been capable of wonder, he might have enquired what had happened to his master. But Ah Sin, according to his nature, took the rough and the smooth alike, and when his master finally declared he would go to bed, he lighted the candle and handed it to him gravely without a word. Percival had hitherto always seemed to derive a curious satisfaction from the presence of that yellow unreadable countenance, but he was clearly not in the mood to-night.

“I have a touch of fever,” he said, “and am going to stay in bed to-morrow—and the day after to-morrow—and I am going to have visitors, respectable, philanthropic Christian visitors, but remember I have a touch of fever and can see no one. I have been seeing visions to-day, and I can see no visitors till I get them out of my head. Visions, my son! You should know what that means, though your kind of black smoke is a little more exhilarating than mine.”

There could be no doubt Percival was intensely dissatisfied with himself, and the more he considered the situation, the greater grew his dissatisfaction. To put the matter briefly, he had made an egregious ass of himself. What did it matter to him whether a girl's eyes were grey or blue? What could it profit him whether she seemed to show an interest in him and his crazy adventures? There was a gulf between them as broad as the Atlantic; they lived in two different hemispheres.

He could not understand himself at all. Because a girl—she was only a girl—had looked at him as though she was sorry for him, he had become as sentimental as a schoolboy, and had talked of things that had been dead and buried for years. He had forgotten himself; he had been sincere with a sincerity perfectly juvenile, and had laid part of his life open for the inspection of a stranger who was probably smiling at the spectacle now. Well, no, she would hardly do that. He knew a good deal about one sort of woman, but this woman was different.

She was not that kind. Heavens! how clear and steady her eyes were! It did one good to think of it. Wasn't there a text about pools of clear water? Humph! undoubtedly he had made a fool of himself, and for that matter he was one still. He was still thinking about this girl; he had been thinking about her at odd times since the first moment he had seen her, and he was wondering when he should see her again. There must be no more of this folly; there must be no more playing with fire. She was as far beyond him as a star set in the glory of a summer night. And there was another matter to think of.

He had been a fool to allow himself to be carried away by sympathy and pity, and perhaps, some sentimental recollection of the past, and so far as he could see only one course lay open so far as Marion was concerned. He knew his feelings now; he lay under no illusion. There was not a trace of the old love left in his heart. The ashes on that altar were cold enough. Yet he had permitted his old sweetheart to imagine he still felt tenderly towards her; he had promised like a lover and acted like a fool, and there was nothing left but to redeem his promise. There was no help for it. It was only another blunder in the blindfold game of life. He was about to burden himself with a woman he did not love, and who, on her part, regarded him chiefly as a means of escape—he was certain of that—from a husband she detested, and who probably ill-treated her. And to what end? that Christopher might escape from an irksome companionship, and place on his shoulders

a responsibility he was more than willing to relinquish. The excellent Christopher! It was not exactly for this reason that he had returned home, but if it had to be it must be. He made no pretensions of observing any scrupulous code of morals, but he was not in the habit of going back on his word. Clearly he must see the thing through, and then?—why, then he would have to suffer for his blunder, as he had suffered before, and Christopher would again have the best of the deal.

Then he began to indulge in another train of thought which was evidently a little pleasanter, and gave him a sense of satisfaction—a train of thought in which his cousin and M. de Paradol had a share, and which might not have been perfectly satisfactory to them had they been made aware of it. But Percival was not at that moment very charitably disposed towards either of them.

“There are two kinds of rogues,” he thought, meditating on this subject; “the rogue amiable, and the rogue malignant, the rogue who is a rogue by circumstance, and the rogue who is a rogue in grain. I don’t mind a plausible rogue who cheats me with a good-natured desire for my property, but I am condemned if I can stand the rogue who deliberately sets himself to flay me without any humorous sense of the inconvenience the want of my skin might cause me. My dear Christopher, you never had any sense of humour or proportion, and I know you, my excellent cousin, from cellar to attic. Ah! I knew the little story of the diamonds would draw you. I

knew I should hear you buzzing round ready to deliver yourself into my hands, but I am bound to confess I had not expected Paradol. M. de Paradol is a surprise, I admit. My friend from Cayenne is a person of respectable antecedents, but he is intelligent, and in that respect you are not well matched. For your sake I am pleased with M. de Paradol. I foresee that he will afford me amusement, if I don't break his neck before we reach that stage. So the little bird is to walk into the trap and two precious scamps are to pluck it at their leisure. Very well, the little bird enjoys the prospect. We shall see what we will see."

The next morning Percival forgot his intention of remaining in bed, and surprised Ah Sin by walking down to breakfast. His shoulder was still stiff, but otherwise he declared to himself that he never felt better in his life, and he was certainly in excellent spirits. He had solved all his difficulties by postponing the day of decision, which was a course quite unusual with him, and he made up his mind there was no necessity to anticipate misfortune. Besides, he was really anxious to see a little more of M. de Paradol, and had a natural curiosity to discover how that gentleman proposed to deal with him, for he had no doubt he had made him the subject of careful thought.

"I have changed my mind, Ah Sin," he said at breakfast. "I intend to see my Christian friends. When they call to enquire after my injuries we must

allay their anxiety. You understand—they are anxious about me. They couldn't sleep if they thought I was ill, they love me dearly; they are good men, they observe all the rules of Confucius. And we have been living too much alone, old hermit. We are growing blue-moulded. We want air and light and society, and we have an opportunity now—the opportunity of a lifetime. You will, therefore, receive them, my Shadow of the Sphinx, with the profoundest gratification, and assure them that I have been looking for their arrival as a man looks for the spring after the sorrows and darkness of winter. And take any money they offer you, Ah Sin. It is so much to the good, and I have no objection."

But Percival was not altogether right in his calculations. He had not as yet estimated with perfect justice the character of M. de Paradol, and had not made sufficient allowance for his caution and his discretion. If that person had any scheme in view, he was not in haste to disclose it, nor was he anxious to alarm the object of his plans by precipitate action. Vainly is the net spread by the fowler in the sight of the bird. M. de Paradol believed he knew mankind, and when Christopher arrived in the afternoon he came alone. M. de Paradol, it appeared, had returned to London on important business, and though he was inconsolable that he was unable to make enquiries in person, it was impossible for him to return before Friday next.

Mr. Ashworth laid great stress on the important

and urgent character of the Comte's business, and was inclined to be communicative on the subject.

"Paradol is a wonderful chap," he said, "a deuced clever chap, and a useful sort of a man to have for a friend. You mightn't think it if you did not know, but he is in most of the big things—high finance and that sort of thing."

"I should imagine that," said Percival with appreciation. "He struck me as being the right sort of man to make a financier. I used to meet a few of them in South Africa."

Christopher was not quite sure whether the speaker entertained a favourable view of financiers in general, and Percival's countenance gave him no clue to his real sentiments.

"You might think from his talk that he doesn't care a straw about anything but horses and cards and other little amusements of that kind, and he really fancies himself as a sportsman. That is the joke, for he can neither shoot nor ride, and hardly knows a horse's head from its tail. But he's sharp as a needle, and as rich as a Jew—I can assure you he is—and a deucedly good-natured fellow where his friends are concerned. He has put me up to two or three really good things lately."

"He must be a very useful sort of friend. I am not surprised that you cultivate his society."

"Oh! I don't see much of him, for he's an extremely busy fellow, though he likes you to imagine he never does anything. It's a secret just now, but

I imagine he won't mind my telling you. He's working a very big thing at present."

"That's curious," said Percival, with that absent air Mr. Ashworth did not quite understand. "Do you know, he really gave me that impression."

"He's got some sort of option or concession, or something—I don't exactly know what—in South America, and he tells me there's a cool hundred thousand in it. I should imagine, Percival, he's the right kind of man for you to know."

"Well, I don't know," said Percival, doubtfully. "I don't think I should shine in high finance."

"If you are looking for an investment you couldn't possibly find a better man than Paradol to give you advice. I'm quite certain he wouldn't mind, and if you like, I'll speak to him on the subject."

"Well, I have a few thousands," answered Percival, in a matter-of-fact way, "that I shouldn't mind putting into something, and that's the truth, but I have been so long away from England that I'm only a fish out of water. And you know I never was a great hand at business."

"You may rest quite easy," said Christopher, "that you will be safe in Paradol's hands if he will only take the trouble, as I am sure he will. I'll drop him a hint, and hear what he says about it."

"Oh! I shouldn't care to trouble him, and besides I'm thinking of going abroad again shortly. I'm coming to the conclusion that life in England doesn't exactly suit me now. I'm like a man trying to get

back into the clothes he has grown out of, and they don't fit."

"My dear fellow, you have never given yourself a fair chance. Just imagine a man with your opportunities coming back to bury himself here in this dungeon without a soul to speak to. If you had been sixty I might have understood it, but when you are only thirty——"

"Thirty-four, to be strictly accurate."

"You have all the world before you. I should go crazy if I were in your place. And with that yellow monstrosity! My dear Percy, some fine night he'll cut your throat."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Percival answered, smiling. "I believe he is quite capable of doing that if you could show him it was to his interest. But the Mongolian is as conservative as the average Englishman, and not very open to new ideas. He'd make an excellent Tory. There lies my safety, and he amuses me."

"I'm hanged, then, if you are not easily amused."

"Oh!" said Percival, "I don't want you to think Ah Sin hasn't got his virtues, for he really has some very pretty gifts. He is a very artistic liar, and would make an excellent romancer; he is frugal to a fault; he is so temperate that one pipe of opium contents him per diem, and he can really cook like an angel. I have put lying, you see, among his virtues. I never believe him, and so never have to doubt him, as I should have to do if he occasionally deviated into the truth. Besides, a good cook requires im-

agination. I tell you what, Christopher, bring Paradol over on Saturday evening, and I will give you a dinner and let Ah Sin speak for himself."

After some slight demur Mr. Ashworth accepted the invitation, and shortly after took his leave, not quite certain in his own mind whether he had put matters as clearly in train as he had intended. As a matter of fact, he was not at all satisfied. He had always had the poorest possible opinion of his cousin's wisdom, and could not bring himself to believe that he was altered, or that experience had taught him any useful lesson. Some men are naturally born to be the dupes of others, and nothing can alter them. But though he could not explain the matter satisfactorily to himself, Percival always seemed to elude him, and to keep in reserve at the back of his speech something to which he did not give entire expression. Was it merely that he was never serious, or was it only his curious comedy manner, or was he really playing a little game on his own account? But that was wholly impossible, and quite unlike the Percival Colthurst he had known so intimately. A fool would remain a fool to the end of the chapter.

But Percival was perfectly satisfied, and was exceedingly pleased with the result.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MOTH AND THE STAR.

THERE is no subject in the world on which men have been so idly cynical as that of love. It forms a small part of our lives; it makes a tremendous part of our literature. It is the burden of every lyric that ever was sung, of every tragedy that ever was acted, of every novel that ever was written, and the wise people of this world (alas! they are only too numerous) shake their heads over the folly of it, and immediately fall to reading with as much interest as if they believed in the reality and existence of what they read. And yet, outside literature, most people have a poor opinion of other folks' love affairs. They recognise its folly; they talk of incompatibility, inexpedience, unsuitability, and are really wise with a small expenditure of wisdom. But perhaps, after all, in this, as in other matters, everything depends on your point of view. The tenses of love make all the difference. You are in love, you will be in love, or you have been in love (more's the pity!), and that sums up the entire situation.

There was no excuse to be offered for Percival Colthurst's conduct. He was not in love; he had

demonstrated to himself the utter impossibility of such madness, and yet he had found himself at the doctor's door on the following day. To be sure, as he made clear to himself, he had no desire to see Patty. He had merely called to return thanks for the kindness he had received, and he was not at all disappointed when he learned that Patty was not at home. Not at all. Yet, somehow, in her absence the house was not exactly the same. The doctor, whom he did see, was a frank, warm-hearted, sensible fellow, who talked very pleasantly, and was really glad to see him. But there was something missing. Her books lying on the table, her work in the basket, troubled him in a manner he could not understand, and he felt some compunction when he went out of his way to make the doctor talk of his sister. He felt that was some compensation for her absence. It was not exactly the sun, but it was a faint reflection of the sun, and he felt in French's warm, brotherly praise as if he were coming to know the girl a little better. But it was one thing talking to Patty, and another to her brother. There is all the difference in the world between sympathy with your affairs and sympathy with yourself, not, indeed, that he wanted either, but it was pleasant, and he was not used to it, and that was the way he put it to himself.

He succeeded in learning that Pat had gone across the common to see some of her pensioners, and, though he sat for some time, he concluded his visit abruptly.

The road by Wickham Common could, under no circumstances, have been considered a short way home, but the day was fine, and the view from the downs was pretty and diversified. Of course, this was the reason why he chose the longer road, and he had no hope or desire to meet the young lady who was travelling briskly with her dogs at her heels. But there was no reason why he should have blushed when he caught sight of her figure on the track, or felt his heart beat violently, after the fashion of a schoolboy, when he held out his hand as she approached. He had the good sense to be ashamed of these unpleasant symptoms, and, almost on the instant, made up his mind to a course which he had been for the last day or two vaguely meditating. There was a danger of complications, and he was determined to avoid it.

"I never was better in my life," he said, in answer to her enquiries, "and have quite got over my shaking. It was only a trifle, after all; but I am glad I met you, Miss French. I should not like to have left England without saying good-bye."

"That is a very sudden resolution," said Patty. "I did not know that you had any intention of leaving England, at least at present."

"No, I only decided this morning. You see, something has happened, and——"

"I hope nothing unpleasant."

"Well, I don't know. Things get a bit complicated, and one has to put them straight if he can."

"Are you leaving at once?" Patty inquired, looking at Ponto, who was busy at a rabbit hole.

"There are one or two little matters I have to arrange, and I am going immediately they are settled. My stakes are very easily lifted. The Bedouins don't carry much luggage. May I walk a little way with you, Miss French? Thank you. It is so many years since I have walked with a lady. I used to walk this way with Mrs. Wells when I was a lad. There is a glorious view from the top of the hill."

"Yes," Patty answered, "you can see Tifton spire on a clear day. I have always thought it was the prettiest view in the country."

"There is no scenery outside England that ever gave me the same sense of home," said Percival, "and I remember every meadow and farmstead as well as if I had seen them every day since. I dare say I shall never see them again."

"You mean that you do not intend returning to England. I should have thought that by this time you would have been tired wandering."

"Tired; I am sick to death of wandering; I hate the very thought of it. There is nothing in the world I should like better than to settle down, not perhaps as a very respectable member of society, but with as much respectability as I could accomplish. I should like—a great many things I can't trust myself to think about. I'm not complaining, though. I get as much as I deserve."

"Of course I don't know," said Patty, "but I

should have thought there was nothing to prevent you carrying out your wishes. When we make up our mind the difficulties generally vanish. I know mine do!"

"I suppose you never read *The Wandering Jew*, Miss French. I don't say it's a pity you haven't, but it's a very instructive work. I don't really remember whether he really liked it or not, but he had to go on in spite of himself, and was always on the march. I remember he went on for centuries. I never finished the book, and I can't tell you how it ended, or whether it ever ended at all, but I sometimes feel myself a kind of *Wandering Jew*."

"If I were a man," said Patty, decisively, "I don't think I should indulge in any such foolish notions. If I wanted to do a thing, I should do it."

"No matter at what cost?" Percival asked, without looking at her face.

"I should first know that it was right," she answered, "and that I really wanted to do it, and then I should not allow the question of cost to frighten me."

"Ah! that is right. But you see, Miss French, I never seem to know exactly what is right. That is the whole difficulty. I often begin things with the best intentions in the world, and when I have gone on a bit I have found that I was going in the wrong direction altogether. So I have had to start afresh, and never got to the end except when I have started wrong, and then I have generally found that I manage to arrive at my terminus."

“Mr. Colthurst, I should like to know why you are leaving England,” said Patty, with more than her usual directness. “I beg your pardon, I—I——”

“It is very good of you to ask the question, Miss French, for it shows that you take a little interest in my affairs, such as they are, and I have invited you to take an interest in them. But I can’t explain very well. The fact is, I have entered into a sort of contract—a matter of business—that is not going to prove very pleasant or very profitable, and that I don’t think I want to carry out. And if I remained in England, I—well, I don’t think I should carry it out. And I have got to keep my word somehow, whatever it may cost me.”

He looked at her face and thought what a fool he had been. He was about to close the door upon the future, and to shut himself out from that hope which he now realised had been springing in his heart. And if she had known what this contract was of which he had spoken so cynically, because he felt almost despairingly, she would have turned and left him where he stood. But she was unconscious of the thought that was pulling at his heart.

“You are quite right to keep your word,” she said, “but it seems a pity you have made the promise. There is so much for you to do here, and so much you might have done.”

“A thousand pities. But the mistake I made was in ever coming back at all. I am going back into the wilderness, but I shall not forget.”

Patty was not quite sure what it was that he would not forget, but she did not care to enquire. There was something in his manner which rather puzzled her; she felt that the footing on which they stood was not nearly so frank and easy as on the former occasion, and his constraint had an effect upon her. It is difficult sometimes to follow a girl's mind in all its vague, half-conscious hopes and dreams, but it must be confessed that Patty had thought a good deal about Mr. Colthurst since this last interview. She had made up her mind that he was capable of reformation, and that she herself might in some way assist in that useful work. He required advice and encouragement, and though her plans for his welfare were not yet formed, she did not doubt the good work which her influence would accomplish. She was profoundly disappointed, but only because the prospects of carrying out this good work had failed. She was happily unacquainted with the experience of human life, and happily she was unaware, as every one knows, that a woman occasionally begins by taking an active interest in a man's reformation, and ends by taking a lively interest in the man. Patty had not yet reached that stage.

"I have always had a good memory, Miss French," Percival went on, "and I shall always remember our first talk in your brother's room. It made me feel more than anything else what a fool I had been, and how different things might have been

with—with a little luck. Now there is one thing I want you to promise me. You will promise?"

"I should like to hear first. I do not like to make rash promises."

"A very good rule," said Percival. "I wish I could always practise it. But I am very much in earnest about this. I should like you to think well of me, and I should like you to believe, no matter what you may hear, that I am not quite so bad as the circumstances appear. Things may look black, and people may use hard language, but there are two sides to every question, and a man may appear to be altogether in the wrong, when he is only the victim of his—well—his good-natured folly. You won't think worse of me than you can help."

"I can't see," said Patty, "that it makes very much matter what I think, but I should be sorry not to think you had done right. But I don't understand. A man should not allow circumstances to overcome him. If I felt I was right, I should let them break me first."

"I am sure you would," he said admiringly. "But I don't know—I can't see my way. I suppose I am different. It's a queer case."

He was talking with the girl as if she were his embodied conscience. "You see, it's this way. I have made a promise which I wish I hadn't made, but it's a solemn, binding promise, that I am expected to keep. I thought at the time it was really the right thing to do. The person to whom I made the promise was an old friend of mine who was in

trouble and difficulty. There was no other way out of it that I could see. It was a very bad case, and I was very sorry. I bound myself before I knew what it would cost me, and now I have got to go on."

Patty was silent.

"I don't see now how I can turn round and say it was all a mistake. And it means a great deal—it means that I must leave England. That is exactly my way, Miss French. I am beginning to cry over the spilt milk almost before I have knocked over the can. Let's talk about something pleasanter than my crazy little castle of sand."

Patty was unusually silent that afternoon, and when her brother mentioned the fact that Percival had called, she merely hinted that she had met him during her walk, but showed no desire to pursue the subject further. But though she acknowledged that it was no business of hers, she felt that she should have liked to know who Mr. Colthurst's friend was, and what was the nature of the promise he had made.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CONCESSION IN PARAGUAY.

IF Percival had been asked what his intentions were regarding Mr. Ashworth and his friend, he would have found it difficult to say. He had no manner of doubt that these two worthies had made up their minds to plunder him, and had already concocted a scheme for carrying their operations into effect. The idea amused him, and he saw himself the object of their designs with a sense of entertainment which had in it very little feeling of resentment. He was not quite sure how he should treat them, but he felt that probably, on the whole, the best thing to do would be to let circumstances take their course. He knew exactly their opinion regarding him; he had done his best to encourage that opinion. He had boasted of his wealth; he had assumed a simplicity which had entirely imposed on them, and he had led them to that point when they were ready to take for granted that he was quite prepared for plucking. They had no idea that he saw through their design; they never imagined that he would offer any strenuous objection to the pleasant little plan they had arranged, and they could not foresee that their dis-

comfiture was the one agreeable outlook in his life at present.

He dwelt on the thought of M. de Paradol with peculiar pleasure. That gentleman was a person of real intelligence and great accomplishments, for there was no doubt he had served a long apprenticeship to his art. He was really a worthy opponent, and so far as he was concerned this was altogether in the way of his business, and one could not blame him so much, though it might be necessary to deal firmly with him. But Christopher was another matter. Still, he was not quite sure. His feelings towards Christopher had undergone a change since he had met him. It is true he had come home with some vague feeling of revenge towards the man who had injured him, but the sense of active hostility had very nearly evaporated. It was hardly worth his while. Christopher's own character had been his own sufficient punishment, and he had made less than nothing by the injury he had wrought him. If he had found him prosperous and flourishing it might have been different, but Christopher was the old Christopher, as needy, as ravenous, and as ill-conditioned as ever. Worse even, much worse, for the smash was coming that would leave him entirely bankrupt and stranded; and Percival felt that it was not worth while carrying on war with an enemy so defeated and broken. Still, that was an entirely different matter from forgiving him. To have ruined and robbed him once might have been sufficient, but no sooner had he arrived in England than his affec-

tionate kinsman had begun to lay his plans, and to repeat again the old story. And the other little matter of Marion—on the whole he felt that he could not really spare Christopher when he came to settle the account which must be made up shortly. But much must depend on circumstances. He would give the partners every opportunity and encouragement, and if they had not rope enough to hang themselves it would not be his fault.

The dinner which Percival provided for his guests was in one sense a perfect success. He had spared no expense; he was ostentatious to a fault. Christopher knew the cellars at the Grange were empty, but the wines were perfect; the flowers must have come from London. There were all the delicacies of the season. There were dishes a Monte Christo might have delighted in, and affirmed that Ah Sin, if Ah Sin was the cook, was all his master declared him to be. The family silver had long since disappeared, as Christopher again knew, but it had apparently been replaced without regard to cost. It was, indeed, as Christopher declared, in somewhat extravagant language, the feast of a millionaire who was not afraid to spend his money. Perhaps a sense of surprise added to the effect; the dinginess of the surroundings may have thrown the splendour of the banquet into greater relief. The dining-room was exactly as the last tenant had left it ten years before. The furniture was old and shabby, the pictures were festooned with cobwebs, and only a great fire of logs burning in the old-fashioned hearth gave an air of

comfort to the room. Mr. Ashworth and his friend had been speculating on the way they were likely to be treated as they drove to the Grange, but neither of them was in the slightest degree prepared for his reception. They had expected an eccentric bachelor's entertainment, and in the mind of one of them at least there was a lingering doubt as to whether Percival's lately acquired wealth was not altogether mythical, or at least greatly exaggerated. But this unnecessary profusion and extravagance at once dispelled that doubt. No man who was not a Cræsus, and cared nothing for money, would have gone to so much expense for an occasion like this.

The partners exchanged glances, but made no remark; they understood each other immediately, and arrived at the same satisfactory conclusion.

Percival took everything as a matter of course, and was only more brusque and careless in his manner. Whatever pains he had taken for the comfort of his guests, he had not thought it worth his while to pay any attention to his own costume, and made his appearance in the old shabby coat in which Christopher had first found him. He certainly presented a curious contrast to both his guests, and especially to M. de Paradol, who was always careful of his appearance, and who upon this occasion, for reasons known to himself, had gone to the trouble of putting on his order, a fact which afforded Percival some silent entertainment.

"Now, you fellows must try and make yourselves at home," he said. "Ah Sin is a wonder, but he has

his limits, and I couldn't stand another servant in the house. When you come to dine with me you must take me as you find me, and give thanks to Heaven things aren't worse. You must really try that caviare, Paradol. I suppose I shouldn't say it, but you won't get it every day. It is a recipe handed down through a line of mandarins for five centuries. Ah Sin, who learned the secret from the last survivor, is sworn not to reveal it on pain of death. The Russians think they know something in this line, but they know nothing. There was a duke, or grand duke, I met at Odessa—a fellow who swindled me out of a good deal of money, by the way—and I believe his idea was to have me sent to Siberia that he might get hold of my cook."

Percival was in the highest spirits and was enjoying himself amazingly. He saw that his guests were now prepared to accept everything without reservation, and would swallow greedily any story he might tell them. The trouble he had taken about this dinner had not been thrown away. It had been an excellent idea to prepare this surprise, for it had effectively established him in that character he was anxious to assume. He could see that in Paradol's altered manner. That active person, as becomes a gentleman with large financial interests, was cool, lazy, and dignified, but it was impossible not to observe the growing deference he paid to Percival's loudly expressed opinions. Under the circumstances, Percival might have run the risk of overdoing the

part, but his extravagance of speech was only a natural part of his present character.

"You were born with a lucky spoon in your mouth, Percy," said Christopher, who had left the greater part of the conversation to his friends, and who had already drunk as much champagne as was good for him, "and I'm not sure you haven't taken the right way, after all, to spend your money. I'm hanged if a big establishment and a lot of servants, and a seat in Parliament, and that kind of thing, give a man any pleasure. You're only spending your money on other people who don't thank you, and you have always got to do something you don't want. A quiet life, a good cellar, and a cook like what's-his-name, aren't to be had every day."

"I was a lot happier in the Karoo with an old blanket, a strip of biltong, and a pipe of tobacco than I've ever been since," said Percival. "When you've got everything you want you've nothing more to live for, and there's an end of you. Do you know what was the happiest day in my life, Chris? I've never forgotten it. I was half mad with thirst; I hadn't a shoe to my foot; I was a scarecrow in rags, but the sight of an old Kaffir woman made me the happiest beggar in Christendom."

"A Hottentot Venus," said the Comte, with a smile.

"You might say so, but she carried her beauty in the palm of her hand. I've got the stone still. I'll show it to you after dinner. Till that moment I wasn't sure that I wasn't hunting a Will-o'-the-

Wisp, but at that sight I plucked up my heart, and, well, I pulled the thing off. Egad, I wish I had it all to do over again."

"It's a curious world," said the Comte. "It is possible, my friend, you might find some one willing to put you in that position if you tried hard enough."

"I'm not sure that I shouldn't be obliged to him, though I mightn't like it at first," said Percival, with a full appreciation of the other's meaning. "It's the race I like; I don't care a hang for the prize."

M. de Paradol appeared to appreciate this sentiment; there was something in it which appealed to his higher feelings.

"I understand perfectly. But again, there are so many people who run and get no prize, and they do not like it. My friend Ashworth, now—he is a good sportsman, and an excellent judge of a horse, but he does not get many prizes."

Christopher did not like that little turn in the conversation.

"I'm not racing now," he said, "if that's what you mean. I have turned over a new leaf. If Percy wants to get rid of a little of his money he can go on the turf and back his own horses. That's my advice."

Percival laughed, and suggested they should adjourn to his sitting-room. "We can smoke more comfortably there," he said, "and there are some cigars I want you to try, Paradol. I won't tell you what I paid for them, or you might think me a fool,

but I'm told there aren't many of them to be had in Europe. I don't know much about them myself, for I usually prefer a pipe of tobacco to the best cigar that was ever made, but I should like to hear your opinion."

The Comte duly praised the cigars, while Percival sat in his armchair, filling the room with the noisome fumes of his Cape tobacco, and watching his guests writhing under the process of slow poisoning. Christopher made some disparaging remarks on the subject, but the Comte bore the infliction heroically, and never winced outwardly. The manner of the latter was perfect, and he was really an amusing companion when he exerted himself, as he did on this occasion. He at once assumed the lead in the conversation, and told a hundred little stories with a great sense of humour. His range seemed to be nearly universal. There was hardly anything he didn't know; there was hardly anyone with whom he wasn't acquainted. There wasn't a court in Europe of which he didn't know the secret history; there wasn't a great financier with whose affairs he wasn't more or less familiar. It was not that he ever said so himself, or made himself the hero of his amusing little anecdotes. Far from it. It was only by suggestion and delicate implication that one really saw how important a person he was, or how nearly he was connected with the people of whom he was speaking.

Percival knew that this display was entirely for his benefit, and was hugely delighted. The gentle-

man who did not like to hear Cayenne mentioned was really an artist of the first water. It was amazing where he had picked up such a fund of information; it was astonishing how deftly he handled it. If he cared for horses or fancied himself as a sportsman, as Christopher had suggested, he certainly kept these tastes in the background on the present occasion. He had a pleasant little way of referring to the weaknesses of other people as though he had no part in them, and merely enjoyed their exhibition; and when Christopher, who was clearly bored, endeavoured to induce him to speak of his own financial operations, he put the suggestion aside as one in which he took no interest. It was so well done that Percival sometimes could hardly believe that he was only an impostor.

"I'm not sure," said Percival, "that I'd care to know as much as you do, Paradol. I like to trust people and treat them as I find them; but if I had your experience, I'm hanged if I could trust anybody. It's a case of swallow all the time."

"There are good and bad," said the Comte philosophically, "full and empty, and the law is, my dear friend, that the empty is always trying to be full. That is the whole situation."

"I have been listening to your infernal stories for two hours," said Christopher, with that frankness which characterised his speech. "I have heard most of them before, and I'm nearly poisoned with that villainous decoction you are smoking, Percy.

Suppose we have a change. What about the stones you promised to show us?"

"Oh!" said Percival, suddenly reticent, "I'm not sure that Paradol would care to see them. They would probably only bore him. And, after all, they aren't much to talk about, and it's not every one who is a judge."

The Comte did not show much interest.

"I am not, perhaps, a great judge, but, yes, I like to see stones. They are very beautiful. Still, I do not think I should care to have my wealth in that form—they are what you call too portable."

Percival laughed.

"But I take good care of mine. I'm not uneasy about their running away."

"Oh, I do not know. I remember the case of the Duc de Richaumont, whom I knew very well in Paris. You have not heard that story—no? But it was a sensation. The duchesse was a very lovely woman, and loved diamonds. She had a set—there were not three finer in Europe—worth I do not know how many millions of francs. The duc had a confidential servant—I forget his name—who also loved diamonds. But he was a judge, and unfortunately Madame la Duchesse was not. I do not know exactly how it happened, but, though madame wore her diamonds and never saw any difference, there was a great difference. The stones were all there, but they were not quite so valuable. The duc's gentleman, who knew all about diamonds, was taking care of that."

"I remember reading the story," said Percival, with a sudden recollection, "in the newspapers at the time; the fellow was replacing them with paste. He was caught with his plunder and sent—I am not sure whether he was convicted."

"I believe I have heard he died in confinement," answered the Comte, who probably knew as much about the subject as anyone else, "but I do not quite remember. However, it is a moral, and I have never forgotten M. le Duc's face when he told me the story. Still, I shall be pleased to see the beautiful stones."

"It was all the fault of Madame la Duchesse," said Percival, rising, with a laugh. "I'll be happy to show you the rubbish, if you care to see them."

Percival left the room and was absent for some time. During the interval the Comte whistled a bar or two from *Il Trovatore*, which seemed to express his feelings, and watched Christopher apparently with a sense of amusement.

"It is a beautiful field," he said softly, "but one cannot gather without digging. You are a bad husbandman, my friend; it will be best to leave to me the agriculture."

"I have left you to do the talking, at any rate, and we are not much further forward. What is the good of all these absurd stories?"

"We establish confidence," said the Comte airily, "and we proceed at our leisure. Do not hasten too much. That is all."

Percival returned shortly, carrying the leather bag

in his hand, and, laying it down on the table, drew up his chair.

"There's not much to see," he said, as he untied the string, "but it will give you some idea of what a man can pick up in the desert. Of course, they are nothing like your friend the duc's diamonds, but they do well enough for a small man like myself, and there are more where they came from."

He emptied the bag, with a deft movement, on the table, and as the flashing stream of stones rolled over one another even M. de Paradol could not repress an exclamation of admiration.

"But they are magnificent," he cried. "I did not expect——"

"Oh!" said Percival, "they are not bad, and there's no paste among them yet. That's the whole show."

It is a wise arrangement of Providence that the mind works behind a mask, and we have no means of reading the secret thoughts of our nearest friends. If Percival had known what was passing through the mind of M. de Paradol at that moment he might not have felt quite so comfortable; but that person betrayed no other feeling than surprise and admiration, and these not extravagantly after the first bewildering moment. But Christopher, who was not accustomed to exercise the same self-command, could not restrain his enthusiasm.

"My God! Percival, I thought at first you were pulling my sleeve a bit. I never saw anything like

these in my life. Why, man, they must be worth——”

“A good deal of money,” said Percival cheerfully. “I’m going to turn some of them into cash shortly, though I think it’s rather a pity myself. Eh, Paradol?”

“Mon Dieu! no,” said the Comte, “I think you are right. I should not feel that I was safe if I were to sleep under the same roof with that charming collection. I should feel for my throat, and I should be listening all night for the footsteps of the thief.”

“I feel inclined to have a try for them myself, Percy,” said Christopher, with a laugh. “If you will only tell me where you keep them, I’ll pay you a visit some night and make the experiment.”

“I don’t fancy a burglar would make much by his journey,” said Percival. “My predecessor had excellent ideas about strong rooms, and I have an excellent idea about keeping the key. I fancy there would be a little shooting going on while the operation was being conducted.”

“It does not appear to me,” said M. de Paradol, “that I should like the situation. It is too barbarous. Put away the diamonds, my dear friend. Do not tempt my excellent Christopher; and accept my thanks for the pleasure you have afforded me.”

“You’re like a grocer with a bag of peas, Percy,” said Mr. Ashworth, as he watched his cousin carelessly putting back the stones, “but, by George, they don’t seem half as much use to you. You can neither

eat them nor plant them, nor make one thing or another of them."

"It is well that he does not make them into what you call ducks and drakes, as some of his friends might, eh, my Christopher! It is true. They are beautiful, ravishing, but, at least, they have one fault."

"What is that?" enquired Percival.

"They do not grow large. When I have wealth I like it to extend, to swell, to bear interest. They are beautiful, but they are dead. It is a pity."

Under M. de Paradol's skilful manipulation the course of the conversation was again altered. It was evident that he took less interest in the stones than might have been expected, and did not care to discuss them. To have so much wealth locked up in an unproductive form was a bad mercantile arrangement, and it was apparent that this was what chiefly struck him. For that reason, the subject was rather painful. He preferred to hear the story of Percival's adventures; he preferred even to talk of his own, which he did with becoming modesty, and left the impression that the world was not such a bad place when it had inhabitants like M. de Paradol. Percival really could not help admiring him. The wolf had the manners of the lamb. He was so complacent and good-natured, that you could hardly help giving him your entire sympathy. One did him a great wrong to suspect him. Such bonhomie could not be used merely as a cloak. No, that was impossible. Then Percival remembered the

concession, and thought he would give his guest a chance.

"Look here, Paradol," he said, "I want advice. I'm told, and I can see for myself, you know all about these things, and I've been so long away from England that I practically know nobody, and have got out of touch with everything. I've got a little money—well, for a poor devil like myself, a good deal of money—that I want to invest in a profitable sort of way. I've still got as big an interest in the mines as I want to have, and I'd like something else. What would you advise me to do with it?"

"That is not difficult," said M. de Paradol, blowing the ash from his cigar. "I do not like diamonds, because they walk too easily. You would like to lie down and sleep feeling safe. My friend, I should put my money in your consols, or perhaps in land. That does not walk."

"No," Percival admitted, "that does not walk, and I've thought of that, but it's not very interesting, and I should like something that would give me a return for my money."

"You cannot do that with perfect safety," said the Comte, as though perfect safety were the one thing a man should look for.

"Well, I suppose not, but I can afford a bit of a risk, and shouldn't mind it. You don't mean to say that you always go in for certainties yourself?"

"I should not put a shilling in anything that I did not believe as safe as the Bank of France," was the answer. "Oh! no, I do not care to speculate. Take

my advice, my friend, and do not throw away your good loaf for a little butter. It is a mistake."

"I suppose you are right," Percival admitted, "and I'd better follow your advice. "I'll see what they say when I run up to town next week, but it's an infernal nuisance."

Christopher was about to speak, when he caught M. de Paradol's eye and changed his mind.

"A nuisance, yes," Paradol went on, "but it is easy to make money—very easy—but it's difficult to keep it. Fools make the money, and the wise men spend it for them. That is the great law. I know it; and, perhaps," he added ingenuously, "I also have helped to spend it. It is my business."

"And a very good business, too," said Percival, appreciating the joke. "I daresay you've never any reason to be idle."

"No, that is true, and at present I am very busy, and after this I shall rest. I shall have done enough."

"A big thing?"

"Well—perhaps," he modestly conceded, "if I am able to carry it out, and I do not doubt. But it is not so safe as your consols."

"I daresay I shouldn't ask anything about it. I suppose it's a secret."

"Well, I do not know. I do not care to talk of these matters till they are accomplished. So much happens, and there is much between the lip and the slip. Still, I do not care, and you are not likely to what you call spoil the market."

“No,” Percival said, “there wasn’t much chance of that.”

“It was curious, it was a veritable accident. The great things always arise by accident. There was a man I knew once, a long time ago, who had ideas and a genius—a great genius. At that time he made clocks and watermills, and even tops with wonderful mechanism, but nothing did succeed with him. He failed everywhere. His business was sold up, and he was compelled to travel without a sou. For me, fortunately, it was reserved to help to pay his passage to South America, where he thought he might find work. Abroad one can flourish, one can have scope. He no longer made tops—no, he made engines, and he made railways, and, best of all, he made money. So far so well, but you shall hear. Then he thought his fortune was at last made, for he obtained a great contract to construct a canal in Paraguay, for I do not know how many thousands of pounds. He received some sums from time to time, but the expenses were enormous, and when he had finished and presented his bill, behold there was a little revolution and the treasury was empty. It was ruin; they were sorry, but they could not help. They would pay him with a concession out of which he might make a fortune, one hundred miles of the richest country in the world, and he, seeing nothing better, consented to the arrangement. You will say that he had done well, but not quite so.”

“I suppose there was some little difficulty about

title deeds?" said Percival. "I've always heard they were slippery fellows to deal with."

"No, not so. He took good care of that. The title was perfect, but it was one thing to have the land, and quite another thing to turn it into money. He came to England, but he knew no one. He showed his maps, his deeds, his specimens, but no one would have them at any price, and he went lower and lower. His land was only a thing to hang round his neck. By chance, for these things always happen by accident, I met my friend in the Strand, and I knew him at once. He told me his story, and I said perhaps this is a little in my way. I saw and I was not altogether astonished, for I knew Paraguay. It has a great future; there is coal and wood and iron, and there is gold that can easily be worked. There was nothing wanted but the thing my friend could not find—capital."

"I daresay you were able to give him the help he wanted?"

"Ah! well, that is not quite business. I said, we will float our company together, which will be for each of us to our share one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. But my friend had lost all his heart, and affirmed that he was sick of his land and would sell to the first person who offered. But he was not quite the fool. He still held out for a price—a long price. But I have arranged at last, and everything has gone well. We have signed one little agreement, and only one thing remains to be done."

"I imagine," said Percival, "you have only to dispose of your little concession to a confiding public. That won't be difficult."

"But no, there is another little matter—it will be necessary to pay the purchase money."

"To be sure," said Percival, "the man would expect that."

"Fifty thousand pounds," went on M. de Paradol, "is not, perhaps, a trifle, and the time is not congenial, for I am deep in another matter; but I shall easily raise the money, and then I am on dry land. That is the whole story, but the funds are better. There is no doubt the funds are a great deal better."

"Still, I like the idea," said Percival. "I wish I had a friend who would sell me a concession like that."

"I daresay Paradol would part with it for a consideration," said Christopher.

"My friend Ashworth does not understand business," M. de Paradol answered. "It is not well to buy white elephants. But for me—I have found a fortune very easily."

"Let the elephants be white or black," said Percival, "I fancy it's all the same. I wouldn't mind having a share in the venture if things are straight."

The Comte considered for a moment.

"If you really care," he said, "to join me it might be possible to arrange terms; but this is business, and we need not discuss it to-night. To-morrow we shall see."

"There's no time like the present," said Percival.

"I'm in a sporting frame of mind, and I'd like to hear what you have got to say."

"Oh!" said M. de Paradol, "I make up my mind in a moment. I do not part with the whole, but for thirty thousand pounds you have half the interest, and we press the public together."

"If the thing is straight," said Percival, "you may call it done. Send me over the papers till I look through them, for form's sake, and you'll have a cheque the minute I'm satisfied."

"You're a tremendous fellow to rush things, Percy," said Christopher.

"Oh! I don't like to lose time, especially when I want to do anything, and I fancy I have a trifle more than that to my credit at Baring's at present. What do you say, Count?"

"It will be necessary that no one should know anything of the matter till all is settled. I shall be pleased to send you the papers in the morning, and you will see that everything is what you call straight. But it is necessary that we should lose no time, and you will at once decide, for my friend wants his money. Still, I think the funds are more safe."

At that moment Percival thought so, too.

On their way home the Comte was thoughtful, and Christopher, who was in high spirits, rallied him more than once.

"You are a rare fellow, Paradol," he said. "Upon my soul, I believe you are never satisfied. Thirty thousand pounds is a very good night's work."

“I do not know,” said the Comte. “It is too much like an Arabian Night. If I did not think the man a little mad, just a little mad, I should suspect he was what you call humbugging us. But the money is there. Oh! no doubt the money is there. And I never saw such stones but once. My friend, I was thinking if it was possible—there is a great deal of money in those stones.”

“I was thinking the same thing myself, but it wouldn’t do.”

“Ah, I suppose it wouldn’t. But I shall send him the papers in the morning, and I don’t think he will find anything wrong with them. They are beautiful, also.”

The papers were duly sent over the following morning, and it is true that Percival found nothing wrong with them; but M. de Paradol might not have been so well satisfied had he known they were duly despatched the same evening to an address in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, to make sure, as Percival said to himself, that things were really straight.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHURCH SPEAKS OUT.

It is not to be supposed that Mr. Piper was in any sense a type. He was merely an individual with fixed principles, limited intelligence, and a very remote prospect of some day becoming a bishop. He had naturally strong views. He believed primarily in the Church, with a capital letter; he believed in himself, and he believed that the working of a parish was more important than the administration of a kingdom. He did not believe in his Vicar; he did not believe the diocese was properly administered, and he certainly did not believe that the man who neglected to attend divine service should be either tolerated in this world or lightly excused in the next. He was really strong on this point, and it consequently followed that he was prepared to believe, and possibly did believe, the worst of Mr. Percival Colthurst. If a man went to church there was a chance of his reformation; if he did not go he was necessarily shut out from all the means of grace. In consequence, he had expressed himself strongly with regard to the unfortunate Percival, who was quite unconscious of this ecclesiastical censure. He de-

clared that it was a scandal to the parish, and something would certainly happen. He went so far as to bring the matter under the notice of the Vicar, who suggested blandly that there was an excellent opportunity presented to him for doing good, but showed no inclination to move himself. To do him justice, there was nothing personal in his feeling during the early stages of his crusade. He believed in missions to the heathen abroad, but he could not tolerate them at home. And here was a heathen in the very parish for which he was responsible. It was only his duty as a clergyman to arouse public opinion on the subject, but it was not very long before another aspect was put upon the case.

The war was being carried into his own territory with a vengeance. There was not a lady in the parish who did not know how often Percival Colthurst had seen Patty French, who really was incorrigible. She had entertained him at the house in her brother's absence; she had gone out walking with him nearly every day; and she was evidently setting her cap at him in a way that was perfectly shocking.

It is true there was some little ground for portion of this report. Notwithstanding his good resolutions and his intention of going abroad, Percival had contrived to see Patty more than once. He knew that he had no right to do anything of the kind, but the temptation was too great for him to resist. He saw clearly that he had succeeded in making the girl take an interest in him; for which reason he did not spare himself when considering his conduct. But he

put the matter in every way but the right way, as men usually do when they feel they are treating a woman badly. But again and again the one thought recurred to him. What a crowning folly he had committed in entangling himself with Marion! If it had not been for that foolish promise, half chivalrous, half savage, there might have been a chance of happiness left to him. He could have settled down; he could have forgiven everyone, and a thousand times the temptation assailed him to find some means of escape. But with all his faults, he had always kept his word to a woman; it was the one spark of chivalry left alive in him, and the very sense of sacrifice made his resolution to carry out the compact the stronger. Still, it was a pity that Marion wrote to him so often. Why will a woman parade her weakness upon paper which she keeps carefully concealed in conversation? These letters only made his case the harder, and contributed a little to his putting off the evil day as long as possible. And, in the meantime, his chance meetings with Patty were delightful, and were becoming more and more necessary to his peace of mind.

But Mr. Piper was sorely concerned. He could not believe the stories at first. He almost betrayed the strength of his attachment in denying the reports. But at last conviction was forced upon his mind; and the raging agony of jealousy was added to the outraged sense of his spiritual guardianship. At first his intention was to banish the idea of Patty utterly from his mind. She had proved unworthy;

she had shown no sense of the solemn relation in which they stood towards each other. But he found he could not do this so easily. It is easier to let a woman into your affections than get her out of them—before marriage—and love proved stronger than indignation. And perhaps Patty was not so much to blame. She meant no harm, and she did not know the character of the man she permitted to walk with her. So Mr. Piper came to the conclusion that the best plan was to expostulate with her quietly, and to point out the heinousness of the offence she was unwittingly committing. He felt, on consideration, that he could do this with safety in his two-fold character, for, if the pleading of her lover failed (and he was not quite sure on this point), the warning of the spiritual director must carry some weight and excuse his entering on this delicate ground.

He knew that he should meet Patty on the road, for he had been to the house in the morning and he knew that she had not yet returned. Such a meeting, apparently chance in its character, would be preferable to a formal visit, and he could then more easily introduce the subject. And how to introduce the subject he hardly knew. He was in the habit of preparing little speeches beforehand, but he knew from experience that these little speeches seldom or never came off, and that, notwithstanding his preparations, his remarks were generally sadly impromptu. Still, this knowledge did not prevent him from carefully preparing a number of phrases. And

he felt that if his unspoken eloquence could only find expression, it must exercise a profound effect.

A turn in the road revealed Patty's approach. In a moment his feelings crowded his phrases out of his mind, and by the time they had met he was feeling limp, and less capable of expressing himself than ever.

"I have been over to Bretton," said Patty, unconscious of his emotion. "I have seen Mrs. Hillyar. She tells me they are going to have a concert in the schoolroom next week, and you are going to play for them."

"Well," said Mr. Piper, "yes—that is, I didn't exactly promise, but I said I would try if I felt better, and I—I had nothing here to prevent me. But I didn't quite promise."

"Oh! you will have to go. She is quite relying on you, and she is having some one from town. She is very energetic, and is going to make it a great success."

"Yes, she is very energetic," Mr. Piper admitted, "but the fact is, I have been rather unwell lately. I am not sure that I can go."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Patty, who was always in possession of robust health herself. "I did not notice anything the matter with you on Sunday, but I hope you are better."

"To tell you the truth, I am still feeling a bit low."

"That must be a nuisance," rejoined Patty, "when you have so much to look after. John will tell you you want more exercise, and a tonic."

"I don't think any medicine would do me much good," he said despairingly.

"I'm sorry to hear you take that view about yourself."

"But it's not the body that's wrong, Miss Patty; it's the mind that's the matter with me."

This was very far from the way in which he intended to introduce the great subject which absorbed him, but he felt that he could not help himself. The phrases would not come.

"I do not know much about mental diseases," said Patty demurely, "but if you are really ill I should have some advice."

"I have been thinking a good deal about a subject that has been annoying me, and I can't get it out of my head. When I try to escape from it——"

"It must be a very unpleasant subject."

"It is a very unpleasant subject."

"Then think about something else."

"But I can't. It persists with me all the time. If you only knew——"

"I am glad I don't. Please don't tell me, Mr. Piper, for I am afraid I couldn't help you."

"If you can't, Miss Patty, no one else can. For I have been thinking about you."

"About me? Then please do not continue the subject. I thought you had grown more sensible and had forgotten all about what you had said."

"Forgot, and after what has passed between us! It is not likely that I should forget so easily. But I promised that I would give you time to think over

it, and if it had not been for something that has happened, I should not have referred to it now."

"I am not going to listen to you, Mr. Piper, and I do not think I was quite fair to you that afternoon when you spoke to me. I was not quite plain enough, and did not make my feelings quite clear."

"I was perfectly satisfied, I assure you."

"But you have no right to be. I do not love you, I never could love you, and under no circumstances would it be possible for me to marry you. I'm very sorry, but that is really the truth."

"I know you think it's the truth, but it really isn't the truth. It's only because of what has occurred, and what has been troubling me, that you think like that just now. I suppose it's quite natural. But you'll see on a little reflection."

She thought he had really taken leave of his senses, for she had no clue to his meaning.

"If you continue to talk to me like this, Mr. Piper, I shall certainly refuse to speak to you again. I do not think it is quite fair, after what you have compelled me to say."

"I don't want to talk about myself or my own love, though it's as great as ever, but it's another matter. I may not have as good an opportunity again."

She made up her mind that he should not. "Is it really necessary to go on, Mr. Piper?"

"Oh! indeed it is quite necessary. You see, Miss Patty, I have more experience than you have, and I know the world a great deal better. It is very hard

for a girl to learn exactly what a man is, or to learn anything about his past. There are only little things to guide her, but what are we to think when a man is living in open godlessness and never enters a place of worship?"

Patty became more and more bewildered. To what was this leading? What insane idea had he in his mind?

"I don't understand what you mean at all," she said.

"But the whole parish is talking," he went on, feeling his own madness, and knowing that he had blundered hopelessly. "You meant nothing. Nobody knows better than I that you meant nothing. It was all your kindness of heart. And the man is a bad man, with a bad character and an awful history. You need not wonder that I have hated to hear people joining your name with his, and they are really doing it, Miss Patty, and that is why I have been feeling ill."

He meant to be heroic, and in his small way he was heroic, and cruel, and rambling, and foolish, but Patty understood now and could not forgive him. For a moment she was appalled by this charge, for it was the first time the idea of Percival Colthurst as a lover had presented itself to her mind; but the next moment she was cold as ice.

"I am very much obliged to you and other people, Mr. Piper, for the interest you take in my affairs, but I am quite capable of choosing my own friends

without your assistance. And I thought you would have been generous enough——”

“When I am near you, Miss Patty, I can’t express myself. I am always saying the reverse of what I mean. I worship you like a star that shines on good and bad alike. It doesn’t hurt the star, but——”

He knew what he meant, but he felt that he had failed again and he stopped helplessly. It was a beautiful thought that was in his mind, and he should have liked to give expression to it.

“I don’t want to be a star, Mr. Piper, but I do want to be allowed to choose my own friends, though I can hardly call Mr. Colthurst a friend—yet. Still,” she went on loyally, for Patty had large ideas on the subject of defending the absent, “I think he would make a very good friend, and I should like to help him if I could.”

“But a young lady can’t choose her friends that way,” said the Curate, feeling that he had all the world on his side. “People will not understand your good motives; they will say uncharitable things.”

“No matter what you do, they will say uncharitable things,” said Patty loftily. “I really don’t care what they say, and I won’t listen, Mr. Piper. A man shouldn’t listen, either. He should judge for himself, and he should always try to be charitable. I’m sure Mr. Colthurst does not care what is said about him.”

“I am sure he doesn’t, but that is altogether a different thing. A young lady——”

“Good morning, Miss French,” said a loud and cheerful voice behind them, and they turned round and saw the man of whom they were speaking, bare-headed and smiling.

“I saw you nearly an hour ago on the hill above Bretton, and I’ve been trying to overtake you ever since. Good morning, Piper. I don’t often catch sight of you.”

“That is not my fault,” said Mr. Piper stiffly, and there was an awkward little pause.

Percival saw clearly there was something wrong, though what it was he had not the slightest idea. Patty was flushing furiously; in Mr. Piper’s eyes he could read clearly a challenge to battle. Had it been any one but Piper he would have imagined that he had arrived inopportunistly, and had interrupted a tender scene, but the suggestion never occurred to him in connection with the curate. He felt, however, that his presence was for some reason at that moment welcome to neither of them, and he was about to go on when Patty anticipated him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t meet you earlier,” she said, “but I’m very late and must hurry home. John will be waiting for me, and you know how punctual he is. You will be sure to call and say good-bye before you leave. Good morning, Mr. Piper.”

She had called her dogs, and was gone almost before they realised the fact. The two men stood looking after her without speaking; she passed rapidly down the road, and then almost instinctively their eyes met.

Percival smiled.

“Women are the best gift of God, Piper,” he said, “but it’s hard to understand them.”

‘ I don’t pretend to understand them, Mr. Colthurst.”

“No! that’s wise. It saves a lot of trouble, and, besides, we don’t always understand ourselves. Riddle-me riddle-me re—give it up. That’s the way the nursery rhyme goes, isn’t it?”

“I’m not in the habit of studying nursery rhymes,” said Mr. Piper, who did not like the tone and who, to do him justice, wasn’t wanting in courage where men were concerned. “There are much more serious matters in this world to be considered than nursery rhymes.”

“To be sure there are; but, really, I don’t think you are in a very good temper this morning. A man should never lose his temper. It’s not worth while. And a clergyman——”

“A clergyman has his feelings, like other men.”

“More,” said Percival heartily, “he’s generally all feeling. But look here, Piper, I don’t know, but I think you want to quarrel with me. Now mark my words, most people find that dangerous. I’m a bad character, you know.”

“I believe you are,” said Mr. Piper shortly, “and that’s exactly what I have been trying to tell Miss French, if you are desirous to know the truth.”

He had no difficulty in putting his thoughts into language now, and he had certainly no fear of the consequences. His whole soul was up in arms for

the battle, and he felt he was rising to the height of his true stature.

Percival had always had a low estimate of curates in general, and of Mr. Piper in particular; he wasn't very sure whether he ought to be angry or not.

"I'd like to know," he said, "what right you have to discuss my character with Miss French."

"I have the best right in the world. I don't mind telling you, though I am sure you won't appreciate it, I love the very ground she walks on."

"I didn't give you credit for so much taste," said Percival, his appreciation of Mr. Piper going up a hundred degrees.

"I don't care whether you sneer or not. I do love the young lady, and I tell you plainly that you aren't fit society for any good woman."

"You're a plucky fellow, Piper, though you might be a trifle more select in your language. But upon my soul, I'm not sure that I don't agree with you."

"You ought to know your own character, and you ought to know the truth of what I say. I don't know how you feel regarding the young lady——"

"That figure doesn't come into the sum," said Percival. "We are talking about my character, which I am quite free to discuss with you, but I don't profess to have any feelings, my friend."

"I am quite aware of that, or you would not act as you have done."

"Oh! I'm not proud; that's the fact."

"You have no reason to be. Look here, Mr. Colthurst, I know you are making fun of me, but I

don't care. I am going to tell you the truth, whether you care to hear it or not. You can say that I have a selfish interest, but I don't care for that, either. I am proud to acknowledge it. Here is a young lady who is as innocent as a child; she doesn't mean any harm, she doesn't know what you are; she doesn't know how people esteem you. In her ignorance she thinks you are interesting and amusing. And what have you done? You are compromising her; you are making all the people among whom she has to live talk about her. You are doing this for your own idle pleasure. You have no right to waylay her when she is out walking; you have no right to go to her house, for you know very well you have no serious intentions, and you are doing her an injury."

"You seem to know a good deal. How do you know I have no serious intentions?"

This view had not occurred to Mr. Piper. He had never associated Percival with such an idea; but in his mind this only made the matter worse.

"Then I think you are even a worse man than I had believed you to be. Do you think you are a fit person to be entrusted with the future of a pure and innocent young girl, who knows nothing about your past life, and would shrink back with horror if she did? If you really loved a woman, you would save her from such a fate. You would shield her from the sorrow and misery that must overtake her. And, Mr. Colthurst, I am not afraid to speak the truth. She is beginning to take an interest in you—perhaps

she even loves you. I thought I had a chance—I am sure I had a chance—before you came. But that seems to be over now. I don't seek to disguise my feelings or my position. It has broken my heart, but that is not the reason I have warned her against you."

He was not a great or a clever man, but he was sincere and terribly in earnest. There was courage in his eyes, there was a ring of sincerity in his voice, and Percival, who respected these qualities, felt that he had done him an injustice, and was almost sorry for him.

"I know I'm all you say, Piper," he said, "and perhaps more, but don't you think, supposing I had any serious thoughts, that you're rather hard on me? It's your business to pitch into sinners, and I don't blame you. It doesn't do any harm. But do you think I'm never to have a chance again? Am I to leave the way clear for the curates and the saints because I'm not exactly what they would have me? Because I haven't always kept in the track, is that any reason why I have still to go on in the desert? If that's your theology, it's rather hard on the sinners and doesn't leave much work for the church."

"As a man sows he must reap," said Mr. Piper, who was not to be shaken. "You know your own heart and your own intentions, and you know whether I have spoken the truth. But I don't think you are a fit companion for Miss French, and I'm going to fight you as long as you remain in the parish."

“That’s honest,” said Percival, “and by the Lord, you are a far better man than I am, Piper—I like you and I’d like to shake hands with you if I didn’t contaminate you, but I’d better not. You can make your mind easy. It’s not often a poor devil like myself comes across a girl like Miss French, and you can’t wonder if I felt inclined to make a fool of myself. But you’re quite right. I’m not fit to have anything to do with her, but if I thought I was there’d be such a fight as you never imagined in your life.”

Mr. Piper had never preached such a sermon in his life. As a general rule, his little discourses were excellently arranged into three parts and a conclusion; but, though they were sound in their view, they did not greatly move their hearers.

But now Percival thought a good deal over what he had said. It was not that he did not know it all before, but he had not imagined his acquaintance with Miss French had attracted any public notice. That would not happen again. He would spare her that, at any rate. Was it really true that Patty might care for him? If he were only free to choose his own way, what a difference it would make! A foolish promise made in a heedless moment had altered the whole course of his life: it was only a word, and behind that word there was neither force nor passion. There was no depth of sentiment between himself and Marion; there was no real question of love. She merely looked upon him as the means of escape from an intolerable position, and his own

feeling was only sympathy and a desire to assist her. But was this sacrifice really necessary? Could no escape be found from the dilemma? Of his own motion he could not go back upon his word and he felt his own position like the man—he did not remember who he was—whose “honour rooted in dishonour stood.” But it might be possible that Marion might be brought to see things in a different light. She had now time to see how much this step would cost her, and he thought he saw a means at last by which he could reduce Christopher to the condition of clay in the hands of the potter, and make him only too willing to acquiesce in any arrangement he might suggest for his wife’s welfare. Out of the concession in Paraguay it was just possible there might flow results which neither of the two gentlemen most concerned in it had ever anticipated.

CHAPTER XV.

M. DE PARADOL HAS A DOUBT.

M. DE PARADOL was profoundly dissatisfied. He had expected that upon the receipt of the papers Percival would make up his mind at once; and he was now not sure that he had not fallen into a little trap. If he had thought there would have been any delay, he would never have permitted the documents to leave his hands. But he had been thoroughly taken in; he had been altogether deceived by Percival's manner. That person had been so enthusiastic, impetuous, and free from suspicion that he had acquiesced in his suggestion at once, and never imagined there would be the slightest delay.

The documents were of the simplest and clearest description. There was the concession from the President to M. Gustave Droz, and there was the contract of purchase between that person and himself which had been duly witnessed by Mr. Ashworth and another person—all the facts were set out on the face of the papers so that there was no difficulty either as to the title or the subject matter. Percival had almost flourished his cheque book in his

face on the evening of the dinner party, and had left the impression on his mind that the money would be forthcoming on the following day. But now a week and more had elapsed, and there was neither cheque nor answer. If it had been any other person than the eccentric millionaire he should have been really alarmed, but even in his case it was impossible to tell what curious pranks he might not play.

It was pre-eminently unsatisfactory. If he had never before so allowed himself to be carried away, it was because he had relied on Mr. Ashworth's estimate of his cousin's character, and he abused Mr. Ashworth more and more bitterly as the days went on, and Percival made no sign. But though Christopher only laughed, and said it was Percival's way, he was growing a little uneasy himself, and was doing his best to bring things to a conclusion in his own way. He paid a visit to the Grange nearly every day, and though he did not always manage to see Percival, he always contrived to have an interview with Ah Sin. Indeed, it is not impossible Percival might have been interested had he known how confidential a relationship had been established between his friend and his servant, and how quickly the reserve of the Chinaman had broken down before the advances of Mr. Ashworth. But he did not know and never suspected, which was quite as well for his own peace of mind.

But when Christopher managed to see him, Percival did not appear to treat the affair of the concession with the seriousness which so important a mat-

ter demanded. He had no doubt it was all right, but they could arrange things equally well in a day or two, and he was sure Paradol was not in a hurry, Paraguay would still be in the same place that day week, and he made a rule of never doing anything to-day that he could possibly put off till to-morrow.

M. de Paradol had been anxious not to appear pressing, but he felt the matter could not be allowed to drag on any longer. He finally made up his mind to write to Percival, and the result was a very firm and courteous letter in which M. de Paradol expressed the desire that their negotiations might be concluded at once. Mr. Colthurst might remember he had expressed the opinion that the investment was very much in the nature of a speculation and that he had refrained from making any representations which might induce him to embark in it. He supposed that Mr. Colthurst had made up his mind to decline, and he would therefore ask him to return the papers at once, as he had already had an offer which he had made up his mind to accept, and which he had only been prevented from doing by the delay which had occurred.

But even to this dignified and truthful note there was no response, and M. de Paradol was more severe on Christopher than ever.

“You told me,” he said bitterly, “that the man was a fool, but I did not believe that. Oh! no, he does not look like a fool, and I should have known. Men who are fools do not make great fortunes as this man has done, even with great luck. And now

where are we? It is I who have played the fool every time."

"I don't think you need be in such a hurry to call out, Paradol. You have not been much hurt yet, and you'll find that Percy will come out all right. You have only to give him time."

"But we have now given him much more than a week and we cannot tell what he has done. It is now we who are in his hands. It was a great folly of mine to let you lead me to commit this great stupidity."

"I told you we should have more chance the other way. It wouldn't have been hard to get hold of the stones."

"Oh!" said the Comte, scornfully. "You can see nothing you cannot lay your hands upon. But it does not matter now. My friend, you must get me back those papers, no matter what is the price."

"You can't say I haven't done my best so far. I've done all I can with Percy, and I think I can do what I like with the other. What a bloody-minded scoundrel that Chinaman is! I wouldn't live in the same house with him for ten thousand pounds."

"It is not necessary you should live in any house with a man to make use of him," said the Comte, sententiously. "But it is necessary we should have the papers. I have thought that it is because he loves you so much that your good cousin will not return the papers."

"Because he loves me!"

"You will have forgotten, but he may not have

forgotten. He may have a long memory, and he may say—"I can now reckon with my friend, I can make equality between us. The concession in Paraguay will repay me a little for what I have lost.'"

"He would find it hard to prove that the concession was any part of my business."

"Ah! you think so. But I am your friend, and you forget, my partner—it is unfortunate, but it is true—that the paper testifies that you witnessed the signature of the amiable M. Droz. It may be that I am mistaken, and I make him credit to be more clever than he is, but, Mr. Christopher, you must return me those papers, for they are my business. Oh! they are very much my business."

"You have found a mare's nest, Paradol. Percival is as innocent as a child of any such intention, and we are both too old to be frightened by a shadow. It's a funny thing that with so much money knocking about at one's front gate one cannot lay his hands on it."

Christopher spoke as if a grievous wrong had been inflicted on himself. There had been a time when he had looked upon his cousin as being not merely his natural prey, but his own personal property, and he found it difficult to alter his point of view. From the moment of Percival's return the idea had entered his mind, and become fixed there, that he was to repeat the process of plucking the pigeon, and he believed that nothing could have fallen out more fortunately or could be accomplished more easily. Nothing he had since seen had

shaken him in this idea. So convincing had his conviction been upon this point, that to some extent M. de Paradol had surrendered his better judgment, and permitted himself to enter upon a matter of business in which he felt that he had not sufficiently provided for all contingencies. Therefore M. de Paradol was justly angry.

"When you bring me the papers," he said, "I return to town, where I have business that will pay me better. And it is unfortunate, for your own affairs cannot wait. My poor Christopher, this time I am afraid nothing can save you."

"You must get Crockett to renew those infernal bills. You can afford to do something, for you have had a lot of money out of me yourself."

"I have heard that so often," said the Comte, "that I may begin to believe it. My friend, it is useless that I ask Crockett, for he will not renew. Let us recognise the facts. It is assured that you cannot meet the bills, and the little crash must come now or again. And the other matters that have grown and grown till they are too high to overtake. You have been a fool, my Christopher."

"It is very kind of you to tell me that now."

"I had hoped that the rich cousin might help. Ah! it is one thing for our friend to have the diamonds and another for you to have the money. They may glitter like the stars, but they are too far off for you to lay your hands upon them."

There was no suggestion in the tones of M. de Paradol's voice, there was no expression in his face.

"I'm not sure that I won't find a way of getting out of the difficulty if the concession doesn't come off," said Christopher. "Those cursed bills fall due on the third."

"A week," said M. de Paradol. "It is not long, but a man may do many things in a week. There was once that the great Emperor won five battles in that time. But you do not think your friend will lend the money?"

"I'm sure he won't be asked," said Christopher. "Never mind, Paradol, I've an idea of my own, and if the concession doesn't come off, it's quite possible that I may be able to do something on my own account that will astonish you."

"You fill me with astonishment always, but first I desire that I may have my little papers, and then you are free to carry out the great idea."

It is curious that M. de Paradol did not inquire what was the great idea with which Christopher intended to astonish him, but it is significant that when the interview was over he whistled softly to himself the little air from *Il Trovatore*, which was always a sign that he was not quite dissatisfied with the way in which things were going.

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPLANATIONS.

MORAL courage is frequently merely indifference to the feelings of others, or a nice determination to have what we ourselves prefer at all costs, or a combination of both. In any case, the exercise of this virtue requires to be accompanied by great wisdom if we would avoid giving pain to the unfortunate individual against whom it is directed. But, then, most virtues have an uncomfortable side.

It was not the lack of this quality which had prevented Percival from paying Marion the visit which he knew was long overdue. It was quite another reason. He was not sure of himself; he was not sure of his own feelings. In discussing the situation with himself he decided that he wanted to know, not so much what was the right thing to do, as what he really preferred to do. But it is probable that in this he was doing himself an injustice. In his simple scheme of morals it had not at first occurred to him that Marion would be the chief sufferer by the adoption of the heroic method he had proposed for extricating her from her intolerable position. Her

husband ill-used her, and she hated him and could not continue to live with him; it had seemed an easy way out of the difficulty for the old lover, whom she still regarded with tenderness and affection, to offer her his protection and take her troubles upon himself.

In doing this he had suffered from no illusion as to the state of his own feelings. He had been swayed by no violent emotion; he had been urged by no overmastering passion. It had been partly pity, partly the recollection of their former relations, which had not yet lost all its power to touch him, and partly—yes, there was that in it, too—his desire to be even with a man who had done him an injury. He had acted on the spur of the moment; he had made his offer without premeditation; and he had never weighed the consequences for an instant. Yet, so far as Marion was concerned, those consequences were serious, and it was his duty to put them before her. He would not do her an injury for the world. It was not that he did not want to keep any promise that he had made. It was not that he desired to get out of this rash bargain. For his part, he would carry it through, whatever it cost him. But if they carried out the compact they had made, what would the result necessarily be, and in what position would she find herself? Christopher would never divorce his wife if he thought that such a step might tend in any way to her advantage, and she would be thenceforth bound to a man who could never make her his wife, and who—for he recognised this—could never bestow on her that affection which in some

cases may make the world well lost. Yes, that was the truth. He knew the world, and all his experience pointed to the same conclusion. The time would come when this woman, whom he had promised to assist without duly weighing the consequences, would become an intolerable burden upon his hands, and a burden he could not get rid of without dishonour and irreparable injury. A man's life is a patchwork of all colours, and he had lived like most other men; but till now, at any rate, his hands had been clean in this respect. It was not the verdict of the world that he cared about—that did not trouble him in the slightest—but they were both laying up for themselves a store of misery in the future, and the woman's would be the worst, as was always the case. No, he was sure this girl of whom he had been thinking so much lately had had nothing to do with his hesitation or growing scruples. It was true she had attracted him; her frankness and freshness had given him feelings that had been dead for years, but he had never quite forgotten himself. He had not allowed his emotions to get the better of him, and if any faint hope had arisen in his heart he had crushed it immediately. Perhaps—if it had not been for this entanglement, if it had not been for this promise he had made—it might have been different; but with that before him to think of, love and Patty seemed like sacrilege. And yet, the thought of the girl persisted with him. A man, for all his experience, is only a child in some corner of his heart, and goes on

building his little castles of sand till the great sea sweeps them and him away for ever. He was not very old as years went; many men were only beginning their lives at his age, and he might have taken up life anew and found the happiness he had come to think of as an illusion and a dream.

As a rule, he saw what he wanted to do. When he had a man to deal with he was not troubled with much hesitation as to the course he should adopt, and if he was sure of anything, he was infallibly sure of himself. But this was different, and he certainly was not sure of himself now. He could resolve upon no definite course of action, for he felt that he was altogether at the mercy of circumstances. Yet one thing was clear. If Marion held him to his promise he would carry it out at whatever sacrifice and whatever cost, and he would try to make it his business that she should never know how great this had been. It was not merely that he had promised, but he owed her something. It was his fault that she had married Christopher—at least, his own folly had prepared the way for that unhappy event, and he must endeavour to make her some amends for that misfortune. But there was something more. He had led her to suppose that he himself was still unchanged, and that he was still faithful to his early love notwithstanding all that had happened. That was the worst of it. Could he go back now and tell her that it was all a mistake—that she had misunderstood him—that he had been carried away by a

sudden impulse? Undoubtedly—yes, that would be the right thing to do, and would simplify both their lives, but he had not the courage to do it. Whatever were the consequences, he must go on.

It will be observed that his survey of the situation and his analysis of his own feelings were by no means clear, but he usually arrived at the same result. He felt that his own conduct had already decided the whole matter, but he desired to put off the final settlement as long as possible, and it was always possible that something might occur. It was in this state of mind that Mr. Piper had found him, and that gentleman's outspoken declaration had brought matters to a climax. Percival made up his mind that it was time he had set his house in order, and that, having arrived at a clear understanding, he would avoid any complications for the future, no matter what it cost him. And—and he would not see Patty again.

He was not at all sure that Marion was pleased to see him. On his way to the house he had wondered how she would receive him, but he was not prepared for the cold and distant reception which awaited him. She shook hands with him in a formal way, and began to talk of matters in which he knew neither of them took the least interest. He could see, also, that she avoided meeting his eyes, and had placed herself in such a position that he could not clearly see her face. He was not, perhaps, peculiarly sensitive in these matters, nor did he understand much about women, but he felt that she de-

sired to keep him at arms' length, and he acquiesced at once, with a feeling of relief. He began to think that she might have regretted their compact and her sudden confession, now that she had had time to consider it, and he admitted to himself that he hoped earnestly this might be the case. It would save a lot of trouble. But he was not sure. Women often began in this way to clear the ground, as it were, for a more extensive emotional display, and, beginning in this minor key, end with an uncontrolled and disastrous outburst. In any case, he would not go back on his word, and would follow any lead that she gave him.

"You remember my aunt Mary?" she said, suddenly changing the conversation; "I have just had a letter from her and she asks me to go on a visit. I am going next week. The change will do me good."

"Yes, I remember her very well," said Percival, not knowing exactly what to say, "and most people are the better for a change."

"You see, I am rather lonely here. Christopher has not been much at home until lately; and, by the way, you have seen a good deal of him."

"Yes," Percival confessed, "he has tried to liven me up a bit."

"And his friend?"

"Oh! Paradol? I have seen something of him, too, but not so much. I hope, Marion——"

"What?" she asked, growing suddenly hard.

"Well, you remember you said something."

"I daresay I said a great many things. I am afraid we were both guilty of that indiscretion."

"I don't think I said anything I did not mean," Percival said, looking down at the carpet.

"You are quite certain? I thought you had, perhaps, forgotten."

"I have a very good memory, Marion."

"It is sometimes an inconvenient gift, especially——"

Percival was silent. He was not yet quite certain as to Marion's state of mind.

"Especially when we would prefer to forget."

"I can't see why you should say that."

"There are a good many things a man can't see which are clear enough to a woman's eyes. A woman is not so easily deceived, unless she deceives herself, my dear Percival. How long is it since you have been here?"

"Well, the truth is, I have had a good many things to think about. You see——"

"It is always well to be quite honest."

"I don't want to be anything but honest."

"You are sure of that? Then what do you intend to do with Miss French?"

Percival thought he understood it now. He had tried to be loyal to his insane promise; he had made up his mind to keep his rash vow, and already he was accused of being dishonest and faithless. It was clear Marion had heard the gossip of Wickham,

and, like a jealous woman, she had believed it all without asking for an explanation. He was no longer a free agent; he was bound to explain his conduct; he had given her the right to determine his actions. That was true. He admitted as much to himself on the instant. But it seemed like sacrilege to mention Patty's name, and, knowing as he did his resolution and how much it cost him to keep it, he felt himself growing angry.

"We need not discuss that," he said hotly. "I don't see what Miss French has to do with the matter. We had better keep her name out of this, Marion."

"I am afraid it is not possible."

"I think it is. At any rate, we must try. We are not children, my dear Marion, and we can afford to look at things as we find them. Miss French is nothing to either you or me, and doesn't come into our arrangement. I am not in the habit of breaking my word. I have made you a promise, and I am going to keep it."

She rose from her seat and came over to where he was sitting. Her face was very white, but her eyes were shining. Then she laid her hand gently upon his shoulder.

"I think you would keep your promise," she said, "no matter what it cost you, Percival."

"God knows I would," he answered, without looking at her face.

"Not because you love me, but because you have

promised, and were sorry for me. You need say nothing, for I understand. And I am not angry. I—I am glad.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“How often does a man really understand a woman? But we see things more clearly than you imagine.”

“You must help me to see this. I want you to understand me, however, Marion. Whether it was right or wrong, I made you a promise, and I have no intention of trying to get out of it even if I could. At the time I could see no other way, and——”

“You allowed your sympathy to get the better of your judgment. It was not you who did wrong, but I. But I have had time to see things since, as I should have seen them before, and I have made up my mind. I am not going to ruin your life, Percival, a second time.”

“I have counted the cost as far as I am concerned. There is only one person to be considered, and that is yourself. I can hold up my own end.”

“I think you would try,” she said gently, “and I am sure I could trust you. But let us consider myself. A woman has one chance and one choice. If she chooses wrongly she has no help, but must bear as best she can. She may be unhappy; she may live without love or hope; the Law and the Church are both against her. And if she tries to escape, if she tries to find a little joy still left in life—you have seen such women, Percival—there is no help for

them. The world says they are altogether bad—except in books—and the world will have no mercy on them. There is more than that. The love they had looked for becomes a burden, and when that fails everything is lost. That is the woman's lot. If there were nothing more than that I dare not risk it."

"I am afraid it is the truth," said Percival, endeavouring to repress a sudden sense of relief. "I have felt that, but I did not dare say so much. I did not want you to think——"

"You cannot help a woman thinking. A woman knows without being told. We are all born jealous."

"There is no reason——"

"I have no reason—you are nothing to me, Percival; and if you were, I should still wish to see you happy. Still, we cannot help ourselves, and—and I hope you will be happy. I know what I have lost. You would have given up everything; you would have sacrificed yourself for me if I had allowed you, and you—you would have done that with your eyes open. It is not every man who can say that."

"I'm a long way from saintship, Marion," said Percival, touched by her emotion, "but I would have tried to do my best for you. At the same time, I think you have decided wisely, and—and perhaps I shall be able to help you in another way."

"You mean——"

"I'd rather not say anything about it now, but I think I may be able to save you from a repetition of the experience you told me about. I haven't been

able to get that story out of my mind, Marion. It sticks to me like a burr, and every time I see Christopher and his friend—well, there is no use talking. But there's one thing certain—you can't go on living in this way. If you were my sister I should say the same thing."

"You don't know Christopher as well as I do. While any part of my money is left——"

"I know Christopher to the soles of his boots," Percival said, rising to his feet, "and I know that he wouldn't give you a moment's peace if he thought there was anything to be made out of annoying you. It's not a nice thing to say to a man's wife, but we both know it's the truth. You may take my word for it, Marion. Before I have finished with him he will be glad enough to let you go your own way, and I don't think he will trouble you much in the future. That is going to be my business."

She knew that he meant what he said. There was no doubt that he was now very much in earnest, and he spoke with the conviction of a man who is quite certain of himself and the accomplishment of his purpose. His earnestness frightened her.

"I knew you would help me if you could," she said. "But you must promise one thing, Percival—you must not quarrel with him on my account."

"Quarrel! I promise faithfully there will not be an angry word between us. It will all be a case of sweet reasonableness. With the help of my excellent friend the Count, we'll get the thing settled

without a word. I don't want to say any more, but there will be no quarrel. It's not that I should have minded that," he added, "but I suppose there is something in the atmosphere. At any rate, you must be allowed to live in peace, Marion, and be able to close your door on gentlemen like Paradol."

"You are sure you will do nothing rash."

"You need not be afraid. Before I stir a step I shall take most excellent advice, and I promise that your name will not be mentioned. I am going to do the best I can for my—sister."

He held out his hand and she laid her hand in his. The movement was entirely spontaneous upon his part, but he could not know the conflict she had fought with herself, or with how much pain she had achieved a victory over herself. Outwardly she was perfectly calm.

"I don't understand, but I trust you. I hope it will all end as you think. And—and what about yourself, Percival?"

"That riddle is still unsolved, my dear Marion. It is best to say nothing till we are sure of what will happen. And I never was much of a prophet. But I'm beginning to think there is more light on the hills than there used to be."

"Ah! I know what that means."

He did not know; he could not even guess. She had not once betrayed her feelings by a look or a sign. He would never learn how much her decision had cost her, and when he left her he did not remem-

ber that the price of victory is occasionally fraught with more pain than the penalty of defeat. He only knew that his way was now clear, which is the manner of most men.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE CONCESSION.

PERCIVAL had no doubt in his own mind as to the value of the concession in Paraguay, but there were one or two points on which he was not perfectly sure, and it was for this reason he had despatched the papers to London. He was not quite certain as to the formalities observed in the flourishing South American State, nor was he quite satisfied as to the existence of M. Gustave Droz. But, whether the whole affair was founded upon forgery and fraud, or whether the concession was so far genuine and merely worthless, he was to be duped and swindled, and that was an invitation to battle which he would have been slow to decline. He would sift the matter to the bottom; he would see the thing out, and he would finally teach the confederates a lesson they would never forget so long as they lived. He liked to meet rogues on their own ground, and he liked the situation. Its humour appealed to him. The spectacle of the engineers—and such engineers as they were—being hoist with their own petard was one which would afford him unbounded gratification. If things were as bad as he really supposed,

and they had put themselves within reach of the Law, he did not think he would go to extremes, but he would make them pay in some way. In what way, so far as M. de Paradol was concerned, he did not yet exactly know, but he would certainly make it a lesson to both of them, and would place his mark upon the Comte. It was not vindictiveness that prompted him, he felt sure upon this point, but he dearly liked to see a rogue with his head in a vise, and if there ever were two rogues who deserved punishment it was his cousin and the Comte.

He put up at the little hotel in Holborn where he had been accustomed to sojourn when he came up to town from Oxford in his student days, and went to the theatre in the evening. But at the end of the second act he found himself bored beyond expression, and went back to his hotel feeling that he had lost touch with popular amusements.

At a very early hour the next morning he was ready to call on his solicitor, and almost before that gentleman had gone through his early correspondence Mr. Percival Colthurst was announced. It was not Mr. Ogden's habit to see a client until at least an hour later, but he had conceived a special interest in the gentleman whose card had been brought to him, and some curiosity to see him. He had been introduced by a valued correspondent at Capetown, and he had already transacted a good deal of business, and very profitable business, for him. Hitherto they had communicated entirely through the post, and, though he had come to the conclusion that he was

a little eccentric, he had formed a strong opinion regarding his shrewdness and capacity. He must be a curious person. A man who was able to say all he wanted in half-a-dozen lines was as rare as he was admirable. And a good client, a very good client, shrewd and sensible, but willing to take advice.

The senior partner of Ogden, Baker & Bains was quite as willing as any other solicitor to permit a client to cool in the waiting-room, but, being a shrewd man, he felt this was not the policy to pursue with the person whose correspondence he had read with so much satisfaction, and Percival was asked into his private room without any unnecessary delay.

“Good morning, Mr. Colthurst,” he said, rising. “I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance. I believe our correspondence has been equally satisfactory on both sides, and—ah! I feel that we are quite old friends. I suppose you have only returned to England last week?”

“The truth is that I’ve been back more than a month, but your letters will be sent on. The fact is, I hate writing.”

“I wish there were more people of your way of thinking. What a lot of trouble it would save both themselves and other people! For many reasons, Mr. Colthurst, for many reasons. *Litera scripta manet*, as we lawyers say. But, dear me, people will never be wise.”

“It would give you a good deal less to do if they were,” said Percival.

“Quite true, my dear sir; we lawyers flourish in a very unpleasant soil sometimes. To be sure. But we like it. Oh! yes, we like it. I suppose you intend remaining in England, now that you have come back among us.”

“No,” said Percival. “I’m leaving next week, or the week after at the latest. The fact is, the climate and the people don’t suit me, and I want a change.”

“Ah! do you say so? Personally, though I have never been out of England, I think the English climate the best in the world, though, perhaps a little moist; and the people, really, Mr. Colthurst, you know you are an Englishman yourself, and I can say no more.”

“You’re giving them a high character,” answered Percival; “but the fact is, I’m getting restless and want a change.”

“Pardon me, but I think you make a mistake. Why bury yourself in the country? I have found the country delightful myself for a week, but sometimes, dear me, very monotonous. My family always goes down to Devonshire for two months every year, and I speak from experience. The country is a very good thing for a man’s wife and family, but a man himself requires the change and variety of a town life. I can always see as much of the country as satisfies me from the flags of Covent Garden. No, my dear sir, London is the place for a man like you.”

“It would kill me in a week,” said Percival. “I’m tired of it already.”

"How extraordinary! Well, well, there is no accounting for tastes. But you will dine with me this evening, quite as a bachelor, you know?"

"Can't," said Percival laconically. "I've come down here on business, and I'm going back this afternoon. What about the papers I sent you?"

Mr. Ogden smiled.

"I like your way of coming to the point, Mr. Colthurst. It is really refreshing. Ah! the papers, to be sure."

"Yes, the Paraguay business."

"I hope, my dear sir, you are not committed in any way. You will remember, you sent me no details."

"To be sure I remember. I only wanted all the information you could get me."

"Quite so. It is altogether an extraordinary affair, and really displays a vast amount of ability on the part of some person or persons. But then a man of your experience, like myself, must necessarily be brought into contact with all sorts of curious people."

"That's a fact," said Percival, "round and square, good and bad; but I'd like to hear really how things are. I suppose it's a fraud?"

"The matter was left in the hands of my partner, Mr. Bains, who generally deals with matters of this kind and has had a great deal of experience. He is, unfortunately, from home at present, but he has had a report prepared, which you will find exceedingly interesting and instructive—dear me, very in-

structive. I suppose you will want me to go a little further. In the interests of society——”

“I don’t care a jack straw about society,” said Percival; “but, if you don’t mind, I’ll hear what you have found out.”

“Certainly. Quite right. I quite agree that is the best course.”

Mr. Ogden rang the bell and a clerk appeared.

“I want Mr. Colthurst’s papers. My partner is an extraordinary man in affairs of this kind, and gives himself no end of trouble. He has a natural aptitude for it, I tell him. Ah! thank you. Now, Mr. Colthurst, only a matter of form, but we like to be particular.”

“Oh! I can dispense with the matter of form,” Percival said.

“We like accuracy,” said Mr. Ogden pleasantly. “And now, Mr. Colthurst, we shall begin at the beginning.”

“Yes, I’d prefer you began there.”

“There was, I say was, a M. Droz, who did some work for the government of Paraguay, and who in return for his services received a considerable concession of land, with the exclusive right of working minerals, felling timber, and the usual accessories to a grant of that description.”

“Then the thing is all right?”

“Just wait a moment. M. Droz appears to have been a person of considerable inventive ability, but with no commercial habits; and, besides, so far as my partner could discover, a person of very loose

life. He does not seem to have attempted to work the concession himself, or to have tried to form a company for doing so, and finally he compounded with the government for a very small sum of money, and the concession was cancelled. That was in the year 1878. M. Droz came to London, and, having got through all his money, lived from hand to mouth for a considerable period. He died at the beginning of last year in great poverty."

"Then he must have come back to sign the contract," said Percival, "for the date——"

"My dear sir, it is not merely a question of the contract. The original concession to M. Droz was for a period of fifteen years, with a right of renewal upon certain terms. It is to be expected the original deed would be handed up upon cancellation, but there is no doubt the present document is a forgery, though the signatures and the seal are so carefully imitated that the gentleman whom my partner saw was absolutely astonished. That being the case, it is hardly necessary to inquire further; and, as you remark, since M. Droz was dead at the date of the purported signature, he can hardly have been one of the contracting parties."

"That certainly appears reasonable," said Percival.

"Another person might have been satisfied when his investigations had reached this stage, but my partner is not the man to stop short in an inquiry of this kind till he arrives at the end. The two witnesses were the first persons towards whom he di-

rected his attention. The first, as you are aware, is Mr. Christopher——”

“I know all about him,” Percival interrupted. “You can begin with the second.”

“Ah! very well. The other is a man named Hartnell. The result of his inquiries here was curious and satisfactory. Hartnell had been a solicitor’s clerk—an excellent avocation—but forsook the law for the turf, and, though I am not very familiar with these matters, appears to have become a bookmaker, but is now earning a precarious livelihood as a tipster. He also occasionally acts as a billiard-marker at a club in the Edgeware Road. Now, there is a curious circumstance about this Hartnell. He married the widow of M. Gustave Droz, who, it appears, is really a respectable person, and is no longer living with her second husband. My partner discovered this lady, and had no difficulty in learning that Mr. Hartnell had carried away all her first husband’s papers, and, if any corroboration had been necessary, remembered perfectly the entire circumstances of the concession and its cancellation. Then there is another circumstance, and the last link in the chain. The occasional employer of Mr. Hartnell at the club in the Edgeware Road is one of the alleged contracting parties, and is probably known to you as M. Victorien de Paradol.”

“I should have expected as much,” said Percival; “but I didn’t know anything about the club. Anything else?”

“Yes, there is quite an interesting history here.

Mr. Colthurst, I feel it my duty to warn you, as a client, that M. de Paradol is not a safe, as he is certainly not a respectable, person."

"Upon my word, you astonish me," said Percival; "but one is always learning. Do you happen to know whether he is fond of diamonds?"

"Ah! I see you know as much about this gentleman as it is necessary to know. That was in 1881, and he then went into penal servitude for a period of seven years, though my partner cannot understand how he escaped so easily, for there was one very serious feature in that robbery. He actually accused the Duchesse of connivance, and suggested——"

"I know—always a fascinating person. I am very much obliged to you, and I think I know as much now as will answer my purpose."

"But you are not going to allow the matter to rest here, Mr. Colthurst?"

"I should think not," answered Percival, "not by a long way. But, though I've every respect for the law, I'm going to carry this out in my own way, and at present I won't trouble you any further. The law is a machine I respect very highly, but it always grinds in one way, and it may suit me to grind another."

"Really, my dear sir, that is a very dangerous statement. Above all things, you must take care that you do not compound a felony. Society——"

"Society hasn't done much for me," said Percival, "and I'm not going to lose my sleep over society. I

don't know very much about the law, but I can protect myself quite as well as the law can. Oh!—the law. When the law lifts its hand it strikes every innocent being connected with the guilty one—wife and husband and child. I don't want to hit anyone but the fellow who has tried to rob me. By the way—this fellow Paradol, or Courvoisier, or whatever his name is—he is pretty well off now, isn't he?"

Mr. Ogden did not like this new development, and showed it slightly by his manner.

"I believe he has been very successful lately," he answered, "but I cannot see how that can affect the matter."

"No, but it may affect him and me when we come to settle up. And that's all about the concession in Paraguay. Now, I want you to draw me out a little will, as short and concise as you can, and let me sign it before I leave town, for it's the first duty of a Christian to have his affairs in perfect order."

Percival gave his instructions, the will was drafted, engrossed, and signed in a shorter period than ever was known in that respectable office, and Mr. Ogden went to lunch at the club much perplexed, and prepared to hear the worst regarding his eccentric client.

And he had not long to wait.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PRICE OF THE CONCESSION.

It seemed as if the plan of the confederates had been completely successful. Any doubt they might have had was now entirely dissipated, and M. de Paradol confessed joyfully that Christopher had shown a good deal more insight into his cousin's character than himself. The delay which he had suspected as sinister had been merely the procrastination of a careless man, and they were now going to reap a glorious harvest. While he looked for resistance and suspicion, his estimate of Percival had gone up enormously, but now that he saw him in his true colours it had gone down correspondingly. The man who had formerly allowed the foolish Christopher to rob and despoil him was as great a fool as ever, and he might have increased the price of the concession by another ten thousand pounds. Fortunately it would not be necessary to divide the plunder, for he would take good care of that. There was no doubt this was a family exactly made for a man like him—all but the dear Marion, who did not like him at all, and who now loved him less than ever. But he knew the world, and did not break

his heart because a woman more or less did not appreciate him at his true value. Bah! there were always others.

It was only natural that he should rejoice, for Percival's note was all that could be desired. That energetic person had lost no time on his return home, and on the following morning Christopher had received the letter which had brought with it so much congratulation :

"DEAR CHRIS. :

"You know I am never in a hurry. Tell Paradol I've looked into the papers at last. He seems to be quite right. I'm perfectly satisfied they are a gold mine. I've never been in anything I like better. If you and he will run over this afternoon we will get the whole thing squared up. There's nothing like doing a thing at once.

"Yours ever,

"PERCIVAL COLTHURST."

If they had seen the look upon Percival's face as he wrote and despatched this missive, they would not have been quite so satisfied, but as that was impossible there could be no doubt as to its real meaning. It was so eminently characteristic, it was so recklessly demonstrative, that there was no room to doubt that success had been absolutely achieved.

M. de Paradol had quite recovered his good humour, and had received Christopher back into full favour.

"It is true," he said, "that I was wrong, but what would you have? The man is more foolish than I had supposed, but it is well to err on that side. Oh! yes, it is very well."

"Of course, you are right whatever you do," said Christopher, "but I told you I knew him better than you could. I could always do anything I liked with him, and perhaps I shall be able to manage the other little business besides."

"My friend, you will have to take care, though I can understand. They are beautiful stones, and ah! they get upon the mind so that you cannot rest, but that you think of them always. If there is a plan I should like to hear——"

"You are going to hear nothing. I think between us you will have done very well, Paradol."

"It is true. I shall have done very well, but it might have been more—ah! much more. The man who can give twenty-five thousand pounds for the wax and paper could very well have given more. But I am modest. I do not grasp too much. There was a monkey who had once some fine large nuts in a jar, my Christopher—you will remember the monkey, my friend."

"The monkey be——. I wish that fellow was anything but a Chinaman though. He gets on my nerves, and I dream about him at night. It's a deuced unpleasant thing to have his ugly yellow face coming into your dreams, let me tell you."

"It's merely a—what you call it? a racial prejudice," said the Comte, airily. "When you cut your

bread it matters not whether the handle of the knife is black, or white, or brown, or yellow. But take care that you do not cut yourself. That is all."

Percival had turned over a good many plans in his mind relative to his final negotiations with the Comte, but none of them had exactly satisfied his sense of justice and humour. He wanted one by which the tables would be completely turned; he wanted to create a situation in which he should inflict punishment, and the laugh should be entirely on his side. And above all he was anxious to make no personal profit out of the transaction. At last a suggestion occurred to him which appeared to him so beautiful that the idea filled him with delight, and he declared to himself there could be nothing more appropriate or perfect. He was entirely master of the situation. He could propose what terms he pleased, and if his terms were not acceded to, he could give Ogden the chance of seeing what the law could do. But he did not think there was a likelihood of his having to proceed to that extremity. M. de Paradol was far too wise a man, and too prosperous a rogue to run the risk of any such exposure. It was really delightful. In this contest of wits he had played the game with perfect success, and was now going to enjoy a little triumph.

He welcomed M. de Paradol in his usual boisterous manner, and certainly did not present the appearance of a person who was about to transact business of such enormous magnitude. He had resumed his smoking coat and his pipe, and had ap-

parently been busy with the *Times* when they arrived. He rose to meet them with apparent effusion; he gave M. de Paradol his own favourite chair, and, much to that gentleman's disgust, he insisted on his drinking whiskey before he had been seated five minutes, though whiskey was a thing M. de Paradol could not bear.

Christopher and his friend were unusually grave. When it had come to laying hands on the prize they recognised the gravity of the situation they had created, and could hardly believe in their good fortune. But it is not to be supposed M. de Paradol showed anything of this in his manner. He was grave, no doubt, but it was a gravity which became him and the important business he was about to transact. And he was very easy and pleasant, and drank a portion of the whiskey with the air of a man resigned to the worst, and prepared to do even more than that for a friend. Still, he wished that Percival would come to business, for he preferred to let him take the initiative.

But Percival was certainly a long time in introducing the important question. He talked of anything else, and when they seemed to be getting on the verge, would glide off into other irritating and unnecessary topics with provoking irrelevancy.

"I ran up to London yesterday," he said, "and went to the theatre, and stayed the night and did a trifle of business. Lord! I can't understand how it is that I used to like London. It's like the Karoo filled with a multitude of people who have lost their

way, only worse. The atmosphere poisons me, the streets choke me, the noise makes me feel as if I was closed up in a cylinder and rolling down a kopje and never could stop. I haven't got the infernal din out of my ears yet."

"You should try Paris, my friend," said the Comte, who had determined to drink no more of Percival's whiskey. "That is the only place for a tired man. It never gets on the nerves. Ah! London is a monster, but Paris—Paris is a mistress who covers you with flowers."

"I'm not sure that I should like that either," said Percival. "One is apt to get tired of flowers, and want something more substantial. I remember Paris very well."

"You used to like Paris well enough," said Christopher with a reminiscent laugh.

"To be sure. I knew no better. But that is a good many years ago, and I didn't know the pleasure of my own company. A man never knows how good company he is to himself till he has tried. A desert island, twelve months in the Karoo, or a convict settlement, teaches you a lot of things, Christopher."

"I don't want to learn," said that gentleman. "I'm quite satisfied to remain as I am, and either London or Paris is quite good enough for me, without trying your desert island or convict settlement."

"A man never knows what is good for him, eh! Paradol?" said Percival, who saw that the latter did not like the turn in the conversation.

"It is so hard to know what is good for you," said the Comte, "but I am satisfied to know, without the trouble to learn. We must take much for granted."

"Egad, that's true enough, and now I suppose we had better come to business. I say, Paradol, I've been thinking I am taking a great deal for granted here."

The Comte's face never changed. He did not show the slightest discomposure, but only flicked the ash from his cigarette, and looked at the speaker unconcernedly.

"It is not wise to do that in matters of business," he said, "and I should infinitely regret that you acted with haste. But I do not understand. I thought I had explained, and the papers are in order, and speak for themselves. Is it not so?"

"Oh!" said Percival, carelessly, "the papers speak a good deal, more than I care to hear, but that's not exactly all. That's not what I'm thinking about. I suppose the thing really is of some value, and there won't be any trouble with the confounded government when we come to work it."

M. de Paradol smiled sardonically.

"The thing is worth, my friend, exactly so much as you and I will choose to ask for it from the good public, and for the government—the government of Paraguay is not a fool, and will only love too much to see money coming into the country."

"That means, I suppose, that the public will never take anything out of it. As we are going to be part-

ners in this, Paradol, you may as well tell me. It's all a house of cards, isn't it?"

"But you mistake, my friend," said M. de Paradol, gravely, "it is not so. The concession is a great fortune and the country is the richest in the world. We have everything—the forests, the waters, the coal, the gold. We have only to begin and the wealth is infinite. I do not act so. Before I signed the contract, you do not think that I did not make enquiry? And I was satisfied, perfectly satisfied. There is no doubt."

"On your honour, Paradol?"

"Sir, I do not understand," said the Comte in his best manner, "I am always on my honour."

"To be sure, I had forgotten. But business is business. And I suppose this man Droz is all right. I see Christopher witnessed his signature."

"M. Droz is an unfortunate person, but he is a gentleman of the most perfect faith. In what way, may I ask, is M. Droz to be doubted?"

"Well, you see, he may have assigned to somebody else before you came on the scene at all. These inventive chaps are up to no end of dodges."

"Oh! that is it? But there is no doubt. There is no other assignment of the rights of M. Droz than the one I have the honour to hold, and I may say," the Comte added by way of afterthought, "that I have had an enquiry made in the Registry."

"And I suppose you have got this registered?"

"Effectively. That is the whole situation."

"And a pretty breezy one, too," said Percival;

“but there’s just one little matter more that I want you to satisfy me about, and then we’ll come to the weighing out of the shekels.”

M. de Paradol intimated that he was listening.

“When I was in town yesterday I ran across a man who seemed to know no end of a lot about everything. I had a talk with him about this Paraguay business, and he told me a curious thing.”

The two listeners grew strangely silent, and the Comte forgot to replace the cigarette which he held suspended in his fingers.

“He told me,” Percival went on, not appearing to notice the breathless interest he had created, “that there really was a fellow called Droz whom he knew, or somebody else knew, who had got something of this kind in Paraguay. I suppose it was the same man. There couldn’t be two of them?”

The Comte thought not.

“That’s what makes it so curious, for this man really died two years ago. If that is the case, somebody has been imposing on you, Paradol, and you’ll have to look into it.”

The Comte was really a man of infinite resource. He was not in the slightest degree discomposed.

“It is true. The poor M. Droz has been in the habit of dying frequently. I have even seen him dead myself, but he returned to life when his creditors forgot. I am not sure there is not a tombstone to his memory in Kensal Green. It is genius, and your friend will not have known.”

“No, he imagined he was dead for good, but then

he was not the only person who laboured under that delusion. His wife was under the impression she had seen the last of him, and under that impression she has unfortunately committed bigamy."

Percival was gravity itself.

"That is a complication," the Comte admitted.

"She married," Percival continued, "a certain John Hartnell, who, I see, witnessed his predecessor's signature. It is an infernally funny business, Paradol. A man dies, his widow marries again, and the second husband bears testimony to the first being alive twelve months after he is supposed to have gone under. Can you throw any light on the business, Christopher?"

"You've found a mare's nest, that's all," was the answer. "You don't imagine I'd have anything to do with it if I had thought it wasn't all right? Paradol has known the man for years, and he seemed to me a decent sort of fellow, who was down on his luck."

But M. de Paradol knew the game was up. He was convinced that Percival was playing with them, and was only taking a malicious pleasure in drawing them out. He had been playing with them from the first, and while they had treated him as a fool and a simpleton he had been laughing in his sleeve. It was necessary for him now to show a bold front.

"I do not know," he said, "whether you make a charge against my honour. I do not know. I do not care. But I did not ask you to purchase. Oh! no, quite otherwise, You press me to see these

papers, and you make me an offer almost against my will. I do not want your money. I do not desire to sell. And now you say these papers are of no value."

"Fraudulent."

"That I have committed a fraud?"

"Exactly."

"I say it is a lie, but I will not discuss. You will be good enough to return me my property, and I shall wish you good-morning."

"Oh! no, you won't, Mr. Paradol, or Courvoisier, or whatever your name is," said Percival, rising and placing his back against the door. "You thought I was a pretty little bird ready-made to your hand, and you thought you were going to pluck me, but you will find yourself mistaken. I'm not by any means such a fool as I look. I've got you in cleft stick this time, and I'm going to keep you there."

"I do not understand."

"Well, you will in a minute. I've a pretty good memory for faces, Mr. Courvoisier, and I thought I had seen you somewhere the first time I had the honour of meeting you. I wasn't mistaken. It was the jewel robbery and New Caledonia that time, M. le Comte. But you have made progress since then. You've grown rich and respectable. You can even impose on country gentlemen like my cousin Christopher, but you haven't changed your methods. It is forgery this time, M. de Paradol, forgery and swindling. I know something about the house in the Edgeware Road, I know something about your

man Hartnell, and I've got the papers, M. le Comte, and I'm going to use them."

"I do not fear."

"Oh! you have plenty of courage, I've no doubt, but you can see when you are beaten. I may tell you I was going to call in the police—I suppose I should call in the police if I had any sense of duty. But I'm going to play this game myself and sacrifice society. As a matter of fact, you are going to pay down five hundred pounds."

"Ah!" cried M. de Paradol, "the police may understand——"

"Whatever you like," said Percival. "It's in your own hands, and you can make your choice, but it's either the police or the five hundred pounds. I've made up my mind about that."

"It is blackmail," said M. de Paradol, whose coolness had deserted him.

"The deuce a doubt of it! It's blackmail of the first water, and that's the reason I like it. But it's what we call philanthropy too. I want to see you posing as a philanthropist, M. de Paradol. I want to see you a public benefactor. Now I don't want you to suppose that I want your dirty money. I wouldn't have it in my pocket at any price, but it's good enough for a charity. I'm told they want a new school-house in Wickham—the cause of education, M. de Paradol—and with this five hundred pounds you will lay the foundation and put on the roof. It will look well in the public papers—'The Comte de Paradol, five hundred pounds.' You'd

make an excellent member of Parliament, and you might be returned for the county on the strength of it. When you hand me the receipt from the treasurer for that sum, M. de Paradol, I shall be happy to return the documents, and they will be cheap at the price. Should you refuse my terms I shall at once place them in the hands of the authorities. And now you can take your choice."

"If I thought this man serious——"

"I'm the most serious man you ever met in your life. You can take till to-morrow morning to think over it, but you had better not take longer, for I may change my mind in the meantime. Charity on the one side; the police on the other. An easy choice, M. de Paradol. And now I bid you good-morning, as I have a word to say to your friend."

He opened the door and nodded pleasantly as M. de Paradol went out without a word. Christopher had remained standing, having hardly yet realised the situation, and having conceived a new respect for his kinsman which was not unmingled with fear.

Percival closed the door, and turned toward him abruptly.

"What do you think of your confederate?" he said.

Christopher did not answer. He was thinking of what he should say in his own defence.

"I'm not inclined to be hard on Paradol," said Percival, "for he's only carrying on his legitimate business, but I don't exactly know what to say to you. Wait a bit, you had better not interrupt me or

you may repent it. Once on a time you professed to be my friend, and you plundered and ruined me. I'm not going into that now, though I don't pretend I have forgiven you. I came back with a little money and you thought you would do the same thing again. It wasn't your fault that you didn't succeed. And with a fellow like Paradol too! Upon my word, you've brought your pigs to a pretty market."

"On my honour, I knew nothing about him, Percy," said Christopher.

"It's not worth your while lying now. You are a thousand times worse than he is."

Christopher made a fresh show of protesting his innocence.

"There are some men," Percival went on, "you feel it's not worth while to kick—they can get no lower. That's your condition, my sweet cousin. You've had your chances, and you've made nothing by your roguery. If I'd found you a respectable member of society, I think I should have tried to settle old scores, but you've punished yourself. The old man's money hasn't done you much good, Christopher."

"I wish I'd never seen it. I've had the devil's own luck ever since."

"It's not every one gets his deserts in this world. But I'm not going to discuss that either. The question is what are you going to pay for your share in this little conspiracy."

"Of course you won't believe me, but I thought everything was right. And—and for Marion's sake I hope you're not going to make the thing a nine days' talk."

"It's exactly for Marion's sake that I'm going to make you pay your shot, my friend. You have treated her well, haven't you? You have made her a happy woman? I can feel a certain respect for a fellow who robs and plunders a man—that's the law of nature all the world over—but the scoundrel who ill-treats a woman, and cares so little about his wife's good name—no, no, Christopher, we have got to come to terms. I'm going to see that Marion is protected in the future, and you are going to sign a little document which we will make the basis of a future agreement."

"I suppose Marion has been complaining——"

"I suppose I have eyes in my head. Oh! you are a nice husband. Even the man-eating tiger has some tenderness for his mate. I've got you under my foot now, my good Christopher, and, by Heaven! if you turn or squirm I'll grind you to powder. Remember that I'm going to protect Marion from men like you and Paradol."

"You are very anxious about Marion. I suppose you would like to take my place," said Mr. Ashworth with a sneer. "Other people have eyes as well as yourself."

"That's not the question now. Like your friend outside, you have your choice, and you can choose

either alternative you please. But I have sufficient faith in your anxiety for your own welfare to feel confident that you will take the safe course."

"I suppose you will let me see the agreement; at least I ought to know its terms."

"You are going to agree to anything I ask, or the bargain is off, remember that. You will come back and see me this evening, and I shall then have my proposal ready for you to sign."

"I'm—if I will."

"You can please yourself, but I have confidence in your discretion. About half-past eight. And now you can relieve the anxiety of M. de Paradol, who will no doubt be impatient to hear what I have had to say to you. Remember, half-past eight."

Percival was profoundly satisfied with himself and his morning's work. In his opinion everything was straight, clear and business-like, and virtue—or a plausible imitation of virtue—had triumphed.

But he might not have been quite so well satisfied had he heard the whispered consultation between Christopher and the ingenious Ah Sin in the hall, or had he been within earshot of the disappointed confederates on the way home.

"The man is an imbecile," said M. de Paradol, after he had sworn at his friend in every mood and tense, "but he is therefore the more dangerous. He cares not if he will destroy himself if he may but carry out his folly. Five hundred pounds!"

"To build a Sunday school," said Christopher.

"To build the roof of perdition. And he has got

the papers and my letters, and he knows everything. And I thought him a fool!"

"There's nothing else for it, Paradol, but my way. I'm going to have a try at it to-night. The Chinaman——"

"It is better not to say too much. This is not my game. But this man is not easy to trifle with, and you will have to exercise much care."

"I've got everything arranged, and if this turns out as I expect he won't give much trouble, and will know nothing about it."

But M. de Paradol was now hard to convince.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RED HAND.

MURDER!

There was no room for doubt. It was impossible to conceive anything more wicked, cold-blooded and deliberate. In the presence of that awful crime, which strikes with a horror peculiarly its own, all other sensations lose their power to thrill.

The news spread like wildfire. The business in the market—it was market day—was suspended; the public-houses were crowded; the three constables became persons of tremendous importance, and were besieged with questions which they diplomatically refused to answer.

Murder! in their very midst: almost before their eyes: a gentleman whom they all knew at least by sight. Murder, deliberate and mysterious! In the memory of man Wickham had never known such a sensation. The sleepy, commonplace little town had become alive with all the elements of tragedy. At first, it had been remarked, men had spoken in whispers; then they had grown noisy, excited, disputatious, as rumour trod on the heels of rumour. The discovery had been made by the merest accident—

that the constable had himself admitted. If it had not been for the fact that an old woman from the alms-house had gone out that morning to gather bramble, the crime might have remained undiscovered for weeks. She had stumbled on the body by the merest chance lying concealed in the ditch and covered by a heap of loose bracken, and had at once raised the alarm.

There could be no doubt of what had happened. A single glance was sufficient to show the terrible nature of the crime. The unfortunate gentleman had been done to death in the most cold-blooded and deliberate fashion. He had been stabbed from behind, and, though the wound in itself must have been sufficient to have caused almost instantaneous death, the murderer had not been satisfied to leave his victim there. The throat had been severed almost from ear to ear. Wherever the blow had been struck, wherever the deed had been done, there was no trace of a struggle where the body had been found, nor anywhere in the vicinity. The place was some distance from the high road. It was clear the victim must have been carried for a considerable distance, and it seemed unlikely that a single person could have accomplished the task, unless possessed of great physical strength.

As yet, the whole matter was wrapped in mystery of the deepest and most baffling description. Whose hand had struck the blow? What was the motive that directed it? It was not a case of vulgar robbery, that was evident. The possessions of the murdered

man were intact. His rings had been left on his finger, his gold watch still ticked through the whole period of awful tragedy in his pocket; his purse, containing some sovereigns and a handful of loose silver, were found upon his person. He had been struck down unprepared and unsuspecting. There was not a scratch upon him but the two dreadful wounds. His hands were open and his arms extended, as if he had fallen forward upon his face. And he must have been dead already ten or twelve hours when he was discovered.

Such, at least, was the opinion of Dr. French, who had been in the neighbourhood when the discovery was first made, and who arrived on the scene almost simultaneously with the constable.

“I am no use here,” said the doctor; “the man has been dead for hours. It is your business now, and you had better see that nothing is disturbed, and the crowd is kept away until you are sure nothing is overlooked. You may be able to find something that will help you in your investigations. The body does not seem to have been dragged; it must have been carried for a considerable distance, unless the whole thing took place here, which is not very likely. Poor devil! I don’t imagine that he ever knew he was struck.”

But the hard and frozen earth yielded no clue; the dry grass afforded no indication that anything had occurred. There was not a drop of blood, a broken twig, a footmark imprinted on the soil, from which knowledge might be gathered. If the author of the

crime was ever to be traced, it was not here that any clue was to be obtained by which the law might be placed upon his track.

It is wonderful how rumour grows and gathers. No one can tell how it first springs to life, or how the nice details are added until the plain story runs complete and perfect. But before an hour had passed all Wickham was in possession of the news. It ran like wildfire; it met you at every corner; it added to the excitement a hundredfold. Before Dr. French had completed his morning round he had heard it twenty times—the most absurd, improbable story he had ever heard in his life. He was amazed when he first heard it that a story so impossible should have been set on foot; he grew angry when he heard it repeated, and finally he was thunderstruck when he had a conversation with Mr. Wells at his own gate.

“This is an awful business, French,” said the Vicar. “I can hardly credit it yet. There is no doubt that it is murder?”

“None in the least, and apparently as deliberate a murder as ever was committed. Whoever did the deed seems to have been actuated by more than ordinary malice.”

“I’m going over to Ripton to break the news to his wife. I should have gone already, but—well, to tell you the truth, I wanted to know a little more before I went. There are reasons why—of course, you know what they are saying?”

“There are fools who will say anything. Yes, I have heard a most absurd and wicked story about a

very good fellow, and I have been trying to put my foot on it for the last two hours. I should as soon begin to suspect myself."

"I quite agree with you. He's the last man in the world who would be guilty of anything of that kind. But——" the Vicar looked troubled.

"My God! Mr. Wells, you don't think there is a shadow of foundation for this lying slander?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know what to think. I am speaking in the strictest confidence, for I know that you and he had become very friendly, and—and I am bewildered and groping in the dark. But there were reasons, and very grave reasons, too, why Percival Colthurst should hate the man who has been murdered."

"I hate two or three people myself," cried the doctor, "but I never thought of stabbing them in the back. If there were as many reasons as would stretch from this to Land's End, I shouldn't believe that he had act or part in this business. Really, Mr. Wells, if you are among the first to suggest things of this kind——"

"I suggest nothing," said the Vicar. "God forbid that I should! but I want to tell you the facts. I have told you there are things which might be construed into motives—they are the common property of the neighbourhood, and, I suppose, first set the story going. But—but I have heard him threaten him myself."

"I don't care a straw about that," said the doctor stoutly. "He is the very man to talk like that without

meaning anything. I have come to the conclusion that he is the best-hearted fellow in the world. I'd depend my life on him."

"There never was a better or finer lad," the Vicar admitted, "but I found him a good deal changed for the worse, I thought, and he hadn't forgot old scores."

"I don't hold much with the man who forgets old scores," said the doctor; "he's not likely to remember old favours. What does it matter whether he has forgotten old scores or not?"

"It is not a question of Percival Colthurst. The question is, Who killed his cousin Christopher?"

"Of course, that is the question."

"But I find myself in serious trouble, and I am anxious to relieve my mind."

"If you have any anxiety on the subject, I am sure Colthurst will relieve it. Have you seen him yet?"

"No, I haven't seen him. Then you haven't heard what is really bothering me. Percival has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Absolutely. No trace of him can be found."

"Are you sure of what you say?"

"I should not say it if I weren't certain. That is what makes the matter look so serious. I am afraid a warrant will be issued for his arrest. It is a terrible business."

"I can't and won't believe it. There is no doubt enquiry has been made?"

“Immediately I heard the news I went up to see Percival myself, for I thought he ought to know. I had not the slightest suspicion that he had anything to do with it. I found his servant—the Chinaman, you know—very much distressed about him, and unable to say anything as to his movements. He had not seen his master since late the evening before, and he had not returned to the house during the night.”

“He may have gone to town by the evening train. He was in London this last week.”

“I hoped that might be the case, but, unfortunately, it is not possible. His servant knew nothing about what had happened. He told me everything in the most natural way. I will give you the facts as I got them from him, and I have no reason to doubt he was telling me the truth. Christopher supped with Percival last night—you know, they had seen a good deal of one another since Percival came back to England. The servant doesn’t know what they quarrelled about, but he has no doubt they quarrelled during the meal, for he heard their voices in his own room. He supposed, however, they had made it up afterwards, for they both left the house together, apparently on friendly terms. That was about half-past ten o’clock. From that time no one has seen Percival Colthurst, and the other—well, you know what has become of the other. Percival must have been the last person in his company.”

“It is a most extraordinary story. I suppose there is no doubt?”

“The Chinaman is very much attached to his master, and is really concerned about him. I haven’t the least doubt as to the sincerity of his anxiety. And when he told me about what had happened the evening before, he hadn’t the slightest idea there was anything wrong in this way.”

“I can’t understand it. If it had been the other way—I frankly admit Ashworth was not a favourite of mine.”

“No, he was not a nice person, and latterly I know as a fact his creditors have been pressing him. You see, that gets rid of one motive.”

“Whatever may have been the motive for the crime, it certainly was not robbery,” said the doctor decisively. “The man who used that knife felt a certain pleasure in using it for its own sake. I am sure of that.”

“It is an awful thought. I shall have to see the man’s wife, and I hardly know what to say to her.”

“If you will take my advice you will say nothing. When we come to the end of the thread, strange and curious as things look, I am convinced that Colthurst is not the man you will find there.”

But, though French spoke with so much confidence, he was not comfortable in his own mind. It was true that he had been drawn strongly towards Percival Colthurst; there was a magnetism in the man that had attracted him. He had liked his society; he had discovered in him certain admirable and sterling qualities. He had recognised that he was entirely unconventional—he had a leaning that way

himself—but he had thought him sincere, honest, generous and kind-hearted. Was it possible that he was mistaken? Or was it possible that side by side with these qualities there existed another nature which, provoked and roused, might reach red-handed to a deed like this? He had never been able to understand Percival's relations with his cousin, but he had himself heard him speak of him in anything but a friendly way, and he had wondered why he had continued to preserve his intimacy with him. There had been bad blood between them—there was still bad blood—and Ashworth was rapidly arriving at the position when a man of character would not care willingly to associate with him. Perhaps there was something behind it all. But no—a thousand times, no! Whatever faults Percival might have, whatever injuries he might have received, he could never have been guilty of this deed, with its atrocious and revolting features. It was entirely alien to the nature of the man. Under strong provocation he might be capable of an act of violence, but he would never strike his enemy in the back; he would never sink to an assassin.

And yet his disappearance, so sudden, so inexplicable, was a curious feature. Was it merely accidental, or was it in some mysterious way connected with the tragedy? It was certainly very unfortunate, for the servant's story would require a very clear explanation, and if Percival had been the last person in company with the victim, it would prove

a very ugly business. A very ugly business. But he had still unshaken faith in Percival Colthurst.

When he let himself into the house, and found Patty waiting for him, he saw that she had not heard the news. He knew that Patty had a strong regard for Percival, and was always ready to become his champion, but he had never suspected that she entertained any warmer sentiment towards him, or that there was anything but a feeling of friendship such as he had begun to entertain himself. Patty was the last person in the world to disguise her friendship, and the very frankness of its avowal prevented him from remembering that a woman has various ways of concealing her real feelings.

He knew that the news he had heard would be a great blow to her, and he was anxious to tell her himself.

"I have been a little upset this morning," he said. "The fact of the matter is, I have had some rather bad news."

"It is not those wretched shares again, I hope. Really, John, I do not think you ought to have anything more to do with them."

"No, it is not the shares; they wouldn't have troubled me half so much, and I'm going to take your advice about them. The truth is that Mr. Ashworth, of Ripton, has been found murdered a short distance outside Wickham."

Patty looked at him in horror.

"It has been a shocking murder."

"Who has done it? Have they found the person who committed it?"

"No; the whole thing is wrapped up in mystery. The body was found concealed in a ditch and, so far as I can learn up to the present, there is no clue."

"I am very sorry for his wife," said Patty, "especially as I don't think they lived very happily together. And I'm afraid he wasn't a good man. Murder is always a dreadful thing, but in a case like his——"

"No," her brother said, "he didn't get much warning; but, after all, my dear Patty, that's only the Pagan way of looking at it. An hour or two more or less isn't much to pack up your traps and put things in order for so long a voyage."

"Still, I think it is more dreadful in the case of a bad man than a good one. I wonder what Mr. Colthurst will say."

Her brother was silent.

"He was speaking of him a few nights ago, and I am sure he did not like him. If he had only known what was to happen, I am certain he would not have spoken as he did."

"I wish he had never spoken about him at all."

"Why, John?" cried Patty in amazement, for there was something in the tone she did not understand.

"I have had a great regard for Colthurst," he went on. "If I had not, I should not have allowed him to come here so often, or permitted you to have anything to do with him. I believed he was a good fel-

low and an honourable man, and I still believe him to be one. But he and Ashworth were mixed up with one another a good deal at one time, and Ashworth induced his father to make his will in his own favour."

"What has that to do with the murder?"

"I don't believe it has anything in the world to do with it, but people will talk, and they say——"

"I do not care what they say. I could not believe that you would repeat such a thing. Really, John——"

"My dear Patty, I have no more doubt than yourself that Colthurst has had nothing to do with this terrible business. But I want to tell you what has happened, and you will see my reason for saying that I wish Colthurst had never said anything about his cousin. They have been on bad terms and yet they have had business of some kind together. I have no idea of what the business was. They had supper together last night, and quarrelled at supper. After ten Percival saw his guest on his way home, and from that time neither of them has been seen, till they found Ashworth this morning."

"You do not mean that Mr. Colthurst has disappeared, too!"

"His servant says he did not return to the house last night. He is certainly not there this morning."

"Then there has been—oh! John, this is too dreadful. Percival Colthurst is the very last person in the world to do such a thing. I am certain that something has happened."

"We shall know more in a few hours. The Coroner has been communicated with, and in the meantime we will hope for the best."

"I am certain of one thing: whatever has happened, or however black things may look, Percival Colthurst is not guilty of this."

For the first time John French began to think he had acted unwisely in admitting a stranger, of whom he had known little or nothing, to terms of intimacy. He had never seen Patty so profoundly agitated, and he began to fear that she took a warmer interest in this new friend than he had imagined was possible. He had never thought of her as being likely to fall in love at all; certainly, it had never occurred to him in connection with Percival Colthurst. But he began to doubt now. He wondered that he had never thought of it. Colthurst was the very man to captivate his sister, and he had been deliberately blind. He was not sure that he should have liked the thought before anything had happened, but now the consequences might be serious. Patty was not the person to bestow her affections lightly, and, once bestowed, she was the last person in the world to change. It was curious, the more he thought of Patty, the more hardly he thought of Percival Colthurst.

CHAPTER XX.

“CORONER’S LAW.”

THERE are some people who affect to think lightly of the Coroner’s Court. These iconoclasts do not know its history, stretching back into the twilight of law, and they do not know the Coroner who presided over the district of Wickham. He styled himself in a large way “Her Majesty’s Coroner,” and he tried to live up to the title. A tall man with an ineffable forehead, he felt and expressed the feeling in every feature that the Chancellor played second fiddle to himself in the administration of the law. He was the incarnation of ten centuries of the common law, and the sheriff was a child beside him. He certainly deserved well of his country, and was not sufficiently appreciated. Indeed, in his weaker moments he would express his grievances on this head. If Her Majesty’s Judges of Assize—creatures of mushroom growth—had lictors and apparators and other insignia of office to strike terror into evil-doers, why should he have to hold his court in a back room, or a cellar, and be deprived of the mild dignity of a scarlet gown? But he really enjoyed his office. He took a real delight in sitting on the dead. His ene-

mies—and the best of us have enemies, and we should thank Heaven for them, for they keep us up to the mark—declared that he would have found consolation in the decease of his dearest friend, if he might have had the pleasure of holding an inquest afterwards. But that was slander. He was only a great man in an office that suited him perfectly, and he knew and felt it.

The present occasion was one which called forth all his great qualities. Never since he had begun to exercise his solemn functions had a case of such magnitude and breathless public interest occupied his attention. The atrocity of the deed, the mystery of the surrounding circumstances, the position of the victim, assisted to render his enquiry an occasion of unusual interest. As he made his way through the throng that surrounded the "Duke's Head," saluting gravely Mr. Wells and one or two old friends, Mr. Coroner Filligore felt that the eyes of the world were upon him. People had come in from miles round to learn the latest details; there were two reporters specially imported from London, and it was whispered there was present a great detective from Scotland Yard.

The Coroner lost very little time in preliminaries. After the jury had been empanelled and had viewed the body, a matter which one would think superfluous, they were marshalled into the room in which the Court was held, and the Coroner proceeded to address them on the importance of his great office generally, and incidentally on this great crime in par-

ticular. They listened without understanding much of his charge, but their anxiety to hear the evidence kept them awake, and when he had concluded only one man in the corner—a shoemaker, who had had too much beer—required to be awakened.

The first witness called was Martha Wilkins, who deposed to finding the body. She had left her house about half-past eight in the morning, and if she had known what she was going to see, His Worship might be sure she would have done without a fire that morning. She had nearly finished gathering her sticks, and was just going back home, when she saw something white-like under the bramble in the ditch, and she thought at first it was some kind of an animal. She didn't know what kind of an animal. She came a bit nearer—maybe a matter of ten yards. Then she dropped her sticks and screamed. Why did she scream? Because she saw it was a human hand, and she couldn't help it. She knew the hand had no business to be there. She hadn't looked any further; she wouldn't have looked for a thousand pounds. When she got back her breath and felt her legs under her, she ran to the police station as hard as she was able. She didn't look for any sign of a struggle. There was no one in sight. She had got over the fence from the road where there was a gap, and had often gone that way before. There was a kind of a beaten path there. She should rather think she had disturbed nothing, and she hadn't heard any noise or outcry.

The Coroner told her she had given her evidence

very fairly, as indeed the poor old soul had done, to the best of her ability, and called the next witness.

Mathew Gregg deposed that he was a constable, and had been a constable for twenty-two years. He was sitting at his breakfast—it was exactly eight minutes to nine—when the last witness came to his house in a state of great excitement. In consequence of a statement which she made, and which he would repeat if necessary, he went at once to the place she had indicated. It was exactly two hundred and twenty yards from the entrance to the Grange, and about ninety yards from the high road. The field was a very small field, and had not been broken up for many years. It was divided from the high road by a low bank of earth and a thorn hedge. There was a gap in the hedge, as described by the last witness. At the opposite side of the field he found exactly what had been described by the last witness. There was a quantity of bramble piled up in the ditch, which was not deep at this place, and from underneath the bramble a hand was protruding—an open hand with rings on the third finger. The back of the hand was uppermost, and he saw the rings distinctly. Without further consideration he had removed the bramble, and had found the deceased lying upon his face, with one arm thrown forward and the other as described. There was a wound in his back and another in his throat, but his clothes were not disturbed, though they were saturated with blood. The deceased wore his overcoat. He had no hat. There was little or no blood in the ditch. He

carefully examined the neighbourhood and could find no trace of a struggle, nor were there any foot-prints, for there had been a frost the night before and the ground was hard. There were no other marks on the deceased, except those he had described. He was certain from what he saw that he could not have been killed where he was found, but must have been carried some distance. One man might have carried deceased, who was slightly built, but he hardly thought it possible. He was still making investigations, and he hoped to find a clue.

At this stage the Coroner announced that he had hoped the widow of deceased would have been able to have been present, but she was entirely prostrate, and, so far as he could see, could really throw no light on the proceedings, at least, at present. He called the Comte de Paradol.

There was a movement in the audience as M. de Paradol made his way to the witness chair, and bowed with gravity to the Coroner. He was dressed completely in black; as the local paper stated the following day, he appeared to be suffering acutely. When he began to speak his voice was so low and so broken by emotion that the audience could not hear his words, and the Coroner was obliged to ask him in his blandest manner to be good enough to speak a little louder. The Comte acquiesced, with what was evidently a painful effort.

He began by stating, in answer to a question, that he was an intimate friend of the late Mr. Christopher Ashworth, perhaps he might say one of his most inti-

mate friends, and at the time of his death was actually a guest in his house. Alas! yes, he had viewed the body with horror, but there was no doubt it was the body of his friend. He had himself been residing for some time at Ripton, and shared the confidence of the deceased. He had last seen him the evening before about eight o'clock. He had accompanied him for more than a mile from his own house, and had a conversation with him. But certainly he had left him on the most friendly terms, and knew where he was going, for he had discussed with deceased the propriety of his visit. The deceased was a man with a strong will and a hot temper, and was not pleased to be advised. It was to see Mr. Percival Colthurst. There was no doubt. Well, yes—upon business—an unpleasant business—an unhappy matter, but was it really necessary to speak of that? The deceased and Mr. Percival Colthurst had had a quarrel—a misunderstanding—in which he thought both persons were equally to blame. But he did not know. It was a family affair, into which he would prefer not to enter; with permission, he would prefer to be silent. It had to do with the wife of deceased, who had known Mr. Colthurst before her marriage. He had been present at an interview between deceased and Mr. Colthurst on Wednesday morning, when there had been a quarrel, and Mr. Colthurst had threatened deceased. No. He had himself taken no part in that quarrel, but had been present merely as a friend of the husband, and, if he might say so, of the wife. He had thought Mr.

Colthurst unreasonable, for he had expressed the desire that his friend and his wife should be separated. Deceased had arranged to meet Mr. Colthurst later the same evening, and it was when going to keep that appointment that he had accompanied him part of the way. Personally, he did not know whether deceased and Mr. Colthurst had met. He never saw his friend again, until he saw his dead body.

The Coroner and the jury were equally touched by the evident emotion with which M. de Paradol gave his evidence. He was a most excellent witness. He answered every question with simple directness; he offered no unnecessary explanation, and he left the impression that, because reluctant, he was speaking the entire truth. But, besides this, he left another impression. Things were beginning to look very black against Percival Colthurst.

The appearance of M. de Paradol had aroused considerable interest, but the excitement became intense when the next witness made his appearance. It was not known what light Ah Sin could throw upon the tragedy, but it was currently believed that his evidence was of the first importance, and directly incriminated his master. His apparent disinclination to answer the questions which were put to him corroborated this view, and the Coroner was obliged more than once to remonstrate strongly with the witness. It was soon apparent to everyone in Court that the Chinaman was anxious to shield his master, which might have been natural enough; but it was

felt that the Coroner handled him with judgment, and before he had finished had managed to extract the whole truth. There was at first some difficulty in following the witness's broken English; however, as he proceeded he became more intelligible, and ultimately achieved even a certain fluency.

His name was Ah Sin. He had first met Mr. Colthurst at Springfontein, in South Africa, two years ago, and had entered into service with him there. He was a good master, and a good Christian. He had been very kind to him, and had saved his life. He was very grateful, and loved his master with a great love. So much that he was willing to follow him to England, which he did not love. His master had been in England for three months, and all this time had lived at the Grange, except when he had been in London for two days. He did not know what he was doing in London. His master had very few friends. The only visitors he had had were the deceased and the last witness, who had dined once at the Grange, and had paid his master a visit the morning of the murder. The deceased had often been there; certainly, more than twelve times, but he did not know on what business. His master and he had been very friendly, but they spoke of things he did not understand. Yes, he thought it was of things that had happened before Mr. Colthurst had left England, but he was not sure. It was true he had seen his master very angry, perhaps more than once, and he had heard him threaten deceased, but he often spoke in that way with no meaning. Deceased was

not present when he spoke that way. He could not exactly remember what he had heard his master say, but the words were strong words. It was his life he had threatened. He did not think it strange, for he knew that deceased had treated his master very badly. Perhaps—he did not know—it was the duty of a good Christian to forgive. The deceased and the other gentleman had called on his master the morning before, and very angry words had been spoken, but it was talk in the clouds and he did not understand. The other gentleman had gone out, and deceased and his master had spoken much together. Very bad language. He heard Mr. Ashworth say he would call at half-past eight. He thought it was about a paper. He did not know who wanted the paper, but he thought it was deceased who wanted the paper which his master would not give. But he was right not to give the paper. He did not know what the paper was. Yes, the deceased had called at half-past eight. At first, both gentlemen had been very angry, and he thought they were going to fight, but at last the deceased had laughed and held out his hand. He was not in the room, but he could hear distinctly. After the quarrel they had supped together, and both had drunk wine, especially deceased, who had had a great deal. His master very seldom took supper, and never drank too much wine. At half-past eleven they had left the house together, and his master had taken Mr. Ashworth by the arm, for deceased could not walk very stead-

ily. He had never seen either of them again. Yes, it was true his master had spoken to him before he had left and told him to go to bed, as he should be late. He did not know what business his master had at that hour, and he had made no preparation for a journey.

At this stage one of the jurors interposed.

There was one question he should like to ask the witness—Was his master in the habit of carrying a weapon of any sort?

Ah Sin looked at the questioner with meaningless eyes as though he did not understand.

“The question is a very important one,” said the Coroner, “and the witness must know. Your master has been abroad for a considerable time. Have you seen in his possession at any time a dagger, or knife of any description? Now, be careful how you answer this question?”

Ah Sin fenced with the question for some time in his impassive way, but he was at length forced to admit that his master had in his possession a knife, which he was unable to describe; but, he added, he had not seen it since he returned to England.

In the minds of the jury the last admission completely closed the inquiry, and one or two of the more adventurous spirits among them went so far as to say their minds were made up, and they were prepared to bring in their verdict. But the Coroner thought this was anticipating matters a little. In a case of so great importance, it was necessary to proceed with care and regularity. He would sug-

gest they should adjourn the inquiry to an early date, and, in the meantime, it was essential to call Dr. French, who had examined the body, and who was present in Court, to give evidence.

Dr. John French, being sworn, deposed that he had made an examination and had found two wounds, one in the back and the other in the throat, both of which he described in detail. Either wound was sufficient to cause death. The wound in the back had been caused by a very sharp, narrow instrument, probably a dagger, which had been driven with very great force and had penetrated the heart. In his opinion, though there might be some doubt, this was the first wound inflicted, and death had been instantaneous. He could not exactly say how long deceased had been dead when he examined him, but probably from eight to ten hours. Deceased had certainly been struck from behind, and had evidently been suddenly attacked, as there was no sign of a struggle, and no further mark upon the person. In answer to a member of the jury, he stated that, in his opinion, the second wound had been inflicted after death, and was apparently of a most determined and deliberate nature. He did not think it necessary to make a further examination than he had already done.

It was growing late, and the Coroner intimated that this would close the evidence for the day. There were still several witnesses whom, in his opinion, it was necessary to call, especially the wife of the deceased, after the evidence they had heard, as the

question of motive was an exceedingly important one. It was not for him, nor for anyone, to express an opinion at this stage, and he would ask the jurors to keep their minds free and open, however conclusive some of the facts might appear against any individual or individuals. He made this statement all the more readily, because he was not certain that they had not already sufficient evidence on which to base a verdict, but all facts required careful handling, and there was nothing more dangerous or more deadly than circumstantial evidence. In conclusion, he would remind them that the Coroner's Court was the palladium of personal liberty.

With this profound statement, the Coroner adjourned the Court until Monday, and the jury and the audience crowded into the bar of the "Duke's Head" to quench the thirst which legal proceedings generally engender, and to discuss the evidence they had heard.

During the course of the investigations there was one circumstance which might have struck an intelligent observer. There was no doubt M. de Paradol had seen Ah Sin take his place with some curiosity. He had followed the earlier portion of his testimony with breathless interest, and it was with a feeling of satisfaction and relief, which could scarcely be disguised, that he followed the course of the excellent Chinaman's narrative.

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO WOMEN.

THE universal opinion was that the adjournment of the inquest on the part of the Coroner was altogether unnecessary. No doubt could remain in any reasonable mind that Percival Colthurst was the guilty person. Everything pointed to that fact; from beginning to end the evidence was as clear against him as evidence well could be. Even if this had not been the case, who else was there who had any interest in the death of the unfortunate gentleman, who was not such a bad fellow, after all, and who had always been free with his money? They had always suspected Percival Colthurst from the first. His whole conduct had been part of a deep and criminal design for the taking away of his cousin's life. No man whose intentions were innocent would have lived as he had lived, and avoided his neighbours as though they had been smitten with the plague. The story of his wealth, of which they had heard so much, had no foundation whatever, and was only part of the plan by which he had gained the poor gentleman's confidence. He had always been an indifferent character—perhaps even a little mad. A

man does not generally disinherit his only son for nothing, and old Mr. Colthurst had had good and substantial reasons for leaving nearly everything to his nephew. There was not the slightest doubt he had broken the old man's heart, and from that time he had been going from bad to worse. There wasn't the least doubt that pleasant foreign gentleman who was staying at the "White Hart," and who had given his evidence with so much feeling at the inquest, could tell a good deal more about him if he liked. Indeed, it was asserted that he had seen him in a gang of convicts somewhere abroad, but M. de Paradol was a gentleman who kept his mind to himself, and refused on one occasion, when asked the question directly, either to confirm or deny the report.

There was only one matter which was not very clear, and which troubled the public mind more than anything else. What was this story about Mrs. Ashworth, and what was the paper which Percival had wanted her husband to sign? The general opinion was divided upon the question. There were those who thought it had to deal with money and nothing else, for it was pretty well known that Mr. Ashworth had been lately living on his wife's money, and had no other source of income. On this side the belief was that it was merely a question of blackmail. But, on the other hand, there was a considerable number of people who thought there was a good deal more than this in the case, and who were awaiting the evidence of Mrs. Ashworth with con-

siderable interest when she appeared in the witness-box. It would be found, they asserted, that there was a woman at the bottom of the mystery, and that in this, as in most other cases, the feminine element would ultimately account for everything. Exactly how it was they were not very sure, but even the most charitably-minded among them inclined to the opinion that she would be found a good deal to blame. This was the one subject on which M. de Paradol absolutely refused to commit himself, and declared that he always hoped for the best and allowed a lady to speak for herself—a position which his listeners thought characteristically generous and good-natured.

In the meantime, the news of her husband's sudden and violent death had absolutely stunned Marion. If she had loved him, it could hardly have affected her more. Forgetting everything, her conscience upbraided her with disloyalty, and, tortured by that feeling, she thought with horror of the step she had been contemplating, and which she had so nearly accomplished. She ceased to remember the years of ill-treatment and neglect which she had suffered; she put away from her with a shudder the thought that forced itself upon her, that she was now free from the intolerable yoke she had so long and so patiently borne. It was an awful thought to think that this release had almost come as an answer to her prayers—that she had been hoping against hope for the day when she and her husband might be separated through no act of her own. It had come

now; and in what manner had it come? Christopher had been a bad husband, but he had been her husband, and she had hated him. That was the burden of all her thoughts—she had hated him, and now she hated him no longer. She remembered only his occasional kindness; she made excuses for his failings, and she made no attempt to justify herself. Grief is never logical, and Marion could not have explained her feelings, even to herself. But she nearly broke down under the shock, and Dr. French, who had been occasionally attending her, was beginning to grow seriously alarmed about her condition.

The report of the inquest had been carefully kept from her, and it is difficult to say how the news first reached her, but it had a curious effect upon her when it came to her knowledge. She recognised at once how seriously it affected Percival Colthurst, but she did not for a moment believe that he was guilty, and the thought that he should have been suspected filled her with anger and indignation, which served as a safety valve to her own grief and contrition. She was unable to form any satisfactory theory which should include the whole facts, but she never doubted in her own mind that M. de Paradol was the criminal, and that he would be found at the heart of the mystery. She had no ground for this conviction; she had no reason to offer for her belief; but she clung to it with the obstinacy of a woman who refuses to reason. What motive he might have had for killing her husband she could not conjecture,

but he had a real reason for wishing to get rid of Percival, who knew his history, and who would not scruple to use his knowledge. And he had dared to insinuate that she herself had played a disgraceful part in the tragedy, and had supplied the motive for the crime! It was intolerable to think that he should have ventured to invent such a calumny, and yet she had only her own simple statement to oppose against his specious story. It was true there were some things she could not and would not disclose. The public would never know her own relations with her husband, and they had certainly no connection with the crime. It was true that Percival had promised to assist her, but no one knew so well as herself that she formed far too insignificant a factor in her husband's life and thoughts to supply a serious motive for such conduct upon his part. That Percival had taken this awful means to effect her release never once crossed her thoughts.

Dr. French was surprised at the change which had taken place in her; she had grown singularly calm and collected. The only matter which seemed to trouble her was the fact that she would have to give evidence at the inquest.

"I suppose I will have to attend," she had said, "but I cannot see what possible light I can throw on the murder. I knew very little about my husband's affairs, and I had not seen him that day. I know nothing."

"I have no doubt it will be merely a matter of

form, and you need not distress yourself," the doctor said; "but these things have to be done. If it had not been for an unfortunate remark——"

"I understand," she said bitterly, "M. de Paradol was my husband's friend, and is anxious that all the truth should be known. Have you thought why he introduced my name?"

"I heard him give his evidence, and I thought he was sorry after he saw what he had done. But I do not know: I had never seen M. de Paradol before."

"But you thought, like other people, it might have supplied a motive—it was the one thing that was wanting to complete the story. Ah! I see you thought that. There was not one word of truth in what he said from beginning to end."

"But I cannot see why he should have deliberately invented so atrocious a tale. If——"

"You are quite right. You do not know M. de Paradol nor his antecedents. But Percival Colthurst knew, and he has paid for his knowledge."

Dr. French looked at her with surprise and curiosity. She spoke with an air of conviction, and like one thoroughly satisfied of the truth of what she said.

"If M. de Paradol had a motive——"

"I am sure he never did anything without a motive. I know so little, but I am certain that he could tell the whole truth if he were forced. I can say nothing about my husband, but it should be known what M. de Paradol was doing at Wickham, and where he first met Percival Colthurst."

“But I understood they were strangers.”

“Dr. French, Percival was a very rich man when he came home, and you yourself know how careless he was in his manner, and how likely to be misunderstood. Don't you think he might have offered a temptation to a person who had already served his time in a convict settlement, and who strongly suspected he had been discovered?”

“Are you sure of this, Mrs. Ashworth?”

“I have only Percival's word for it,” she said, with some bitterness, “and I suppose that would not go very far now. But I have known him since I was a child, and I have never known him tell a lie. Perhaps he had faults, but that was not one of them, and of all the men I ever knew he was the most transparent and honest. Yes, he had met M. de Paradol abroad, and knew his history, but I cannot understand about my husband. If it had been Percival——”

“Not a trace of him has been found,” said the doctor, started on a new train of thought by her words, “and if he were dead his body would have been discovered. That is the strange part of it.”

“He is not dead,” she said, decisively. “Of course, I know you will think I am hysterical, but I know that he is alive. I have seen him every night since my husband was found, and he was always in the same place and in the same awful pain. I could see nothing distinctly, nothing but his face, and that I saw as plainly as I see yours. I know you think I was dreaming, but I was not; I was wide awake,

and you will yet see that what I have told you is the truth. Percival Colthurst is alive."

Dr. French belonged to that school which believes there is an explanation for everything, as probably there is, and he had no doubt it was a case of nerves. There was nothing in such a condition of mind that a prescription would not set right, and he did not care to argue the question. But he thought less of her story now about M. de Paradol, which for a minute or two had struck him seriously.

"I had formed a high opinion of Mr. Colthurst," he said, avoiding the subject.

"Poor Percival! he has never had a chance, and he had always the best intentions and kindest heart of any man I ever knew. And now even his best friends imagine the worst of him—Mr. Wells thinks he is guilty. I cannot rest when I think of it."

"Then you must try and avoid thinking of the subject at all. It can do no good, and a day or two more will clear up everything. You are too much alone, Mrs. Ashworth. Have you no friend you would care to have staying with you for a few weeks?"

"No, I do not care to have anyone; I am better alone. But you can do me a favour."

"I shall be only too happy."

"Then let your sister come and see me."

"If she can do you any good, I am sure she will be very pleased to come."

When Patty learned that Mrs. Ashworth was anxious that she should pay her a visit, she was at

a loss to understand her reason, and was at first inclined to refuse to go. She had never visited at her house, and they had only been on the most distant terms when they met at those small parochial functions which Mrs. Ashworth rarely attended. But it was not long before her sympathy overcame her natural disinclination. When she heard of Mrs. Ashworth's forlorn and distressed condition she forgot to look for her motive, and at once professed her readiness to go. With her usual promptitude, she immediately carried her resolution into effect, and the next afternoon found herself in Mrs. Ashworth's drawing-room. Whatever her feelings may have been in the first instance, she was genuinely affected by the state of the woman who held out a languid hand to her from the sofa on which she was lying.

"You were very good to come so soon," Marion said; "I suppose your brother has told you."

"He said you would like to see me, and I am glad to come. If I can do anything for you—you must have suffered greatly."

There was a tone of sympathy in the fresh young voice that was like a waft of music. There could be no mistaking that it came directly from the heart.

"You are very good, and I am glad to see you. But you must have thought it strange."

"Yes," Patty admitted, "at first, but when one is in trouble one does not think of that. When we are in trouble it is always a great relief to find some one with whom to share it."

Marion looked at her fair young face and wondered whether she knew what trouble really was.

"Perhaps," she said, "it depends on the kind of trouble. Don't you think there are some troubles we can't share?"

"I do not know, but I think sympathy is always a good thing, and, Mrs. Ashworth, I sympathise with you with all my heart. My brother has told me how you have suffered."

"Your brother has been very good, but he knows nothing. A man can know nothing about a woman's thoughts and feelings."

Patty looked at her in surprise.

"Miss French, I am very unhappy, and I have felt that I must tell some one, or my heart will break. If you cannot understand no one will, for—for I know he loved you."

At that moment Patty thought she had taken leave of her senses. She looked at her in amazement.

"Your brother thinks," she went on, "that mine is the grief of the good wife who has lost the husband that she loved. I can explain nothing but by telling you everything, and perhaps you will not understand. You do not know that for years I have hated my husband."

"Mrs. Ashworth, you should not say that. It is wrong, and especially now——"

"It is now that I should tell the whole truth, for it is killing me. I have hated him for years, and I have prayed that this might happen—perhaps not

this, but something as bad. You can't know—how should a young girl like you know anything?—but my life has been a living hell; it has been an intolerable burden. He has kept me locked up in my room for weeks, he has beaten me, and he—he has done worse than that. I would have been a good wife, I have tried to do my duty. Was I wrong to hate him so much?"

Patty was silent. She could not stop this torrent of words.

"Ah! You say nothing. But that is not everything—all the time I loved another man."

"You must not tell me this, Mrs. Ashworth. I cannot listen to it."

"But it is not a very terrible story, and you ought to know, though perhaps you will not care. Do you think that Percival Colthurst murdered my husband?"

"I am sure he did not. Nothing would ever make me believe that."

"Wait until you hear what I am going to tell you."

"I shall not listen. I have already heard too much." Patty was rising to her feet.

"You will not regret that you have listened. You are quite right. Whoever murdered my husband, it was not Percival Colthurst. And I should know, for I have loved him for years."

There was a great mist before Patty's eyes. She could hardly believe that she had heard the words

aright. It was like walking suddenly into a chamber full of terrible sights.

"You have loved him!" she managed to gasp.

"Yes, I loved him, and I know you are wondering why I asked you to come here to listen to this story. Wait till I have finished and you will understand. We were boy and girl together—neither of us perhaps very wise—and we were engaged to be married. Then he fell under the influence of a man who was older than he was, and though I might have done something to save him, I did nothing. Indeed, I treated him badly at that time, and it was not long after that he had to fly from the country. I thought my heart was broken, and—it is a curious thing—I married the man who ruined him. You know now what my married life has been and what I have suffered, but no one has ever known till now that I never forgot. Then he came back, and I could see that he cared nothing for me—eleven years is a long time to remember—but I told him everything, and he was sorry for me."

Patty was still silent.

"He did not love me," she went on, "but he was prepared to make any sacrifice, and I knew from the first moment that it was a sacrifice. What do you think of the man who is willing to take up the burden of a woman he does not love only because he pities her?"

"Then that was the contract," said Patty, softly.

"Contract! Yes, that is the word; it was only a contract, and when he asked me to leave my hus-

band he had no thought of himself, or what the taking of this step meant for him. The world would have said hard things, but it would never have known the truth. And he would have carried it out at any cost."

"But——"

"Yes, something happened. Would you like to know what happened. My cousin Percival fell in love. But he would still have given up everything; he would have kept his word without a murmur. I was glad that it happened—I had hoped that you would be happy."

"That I would be happy!" Patty cried.

"Then you did not know; he never told you?"

"I thought perhaps—I did not know——"

"I saw the truth and he admitted it. I could not ask him to make such a sacrifice, and—that is the whole story. You may hear a different version, but now you know the truth. Percival Colthurst was the best man I ever knew, and people say he killed my husband!"

"I do not believe that."

"No, but you loved him."

"I did not love him. Mr. Colthurst and myself were only friends."

"Ah! You think that. But he had never spoken."

Patty never forgot this interview; years afterwards she remembered it with pain, but there were two things of which she was certain. One was that Percival Colthurst had nothing to do with the murder, and the other that she did not love him,

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LEAGUE OF BLOOD ACHIEVES RESULTS.

DURING the last few days Dicky Wells had fought half a dozen skirmishes, and at least two pitched battles. Ever since the discovery of the murder he had espoused the cause of the missing Percival with even more than his accustomed ardour, and in that little world which looked up to him as its leader, he asserted his unpopular opinion with a zeal bordering on fanaticism. Percival was his hero. Percival could do no wrong, and whatever theory might be propounded, that theory which involved the guilt of his idol could not be tolerated. It is to be feared most of his friends shared a contrary opinion, for, with that inconsistency characteristic of the youth of our grateful species, they had forgotten Percival's various benefactions and the royal feast he had set up for them on one historic occasion. Dicky's advocacy, even Dicky's ingenious theories, which were numerous and complicated, went for nothing; and he felt there was no resource left but to fall back upon the first and most conclusive argument—the strong hand.

But it was not the natural desire to be in opposition which moved him now. Hitherto he had been

merely a young barbarian, with nothing but healthy appetites and passions. But the cloud which had fallen upon his friend whom he revered and admired had affected him in an almost incalculable way. It was the first time he had felt strongly upon anything outside the range of his own wants. He knew that his father firmly believed in Percival's guilt; he knew that his father's view was shared by every one in Wickham, and he felt that their view was monstrous and unjust. Percival was an innocent victim, and it was the dearest wish of his heart to find the means of clearing his friend's good name.

For the first time in his life he lay awake revolving a hundred schemes, but in his boyish way he recognised that those theories which were good enough for argument failed when they came to a practical test. It all came to this, that the man who had won his young heart and had set before him a higher ideal of manhood could never have done this dreadful thing. That was the central fact, and to that he clung with unswerving loyalty.

He found solace in the society of Patty French. She alone of all his acquaintances shared his views; her faith in Percival's innocence was as great as his own, and she never seemed to tire hearing him praise his friend. He thought it a pity she was only a girl, but he almost forgot that unfortunate fact in her sympathy and encouragement. But, indeed, he had always looked upon Patty as being altogether different from the rest of her sex, and though she might have some feminine weaknesses, she usually

looked upon things in a sensible sort of way. He thought she was, perhaps, too prone to give him good advice, but he always found her able to understand his wildest escapades, and make excuses for him exactly in the right place. Then he knew, being a vain fellow, that she admired him, and that she was familiar with his secret history a little expurgated; and all this gave him the more confidence in her discernment and good nature. She had even managed to extract from him the story of the foundation of the League of Blood, though he had judiciously refrained from describing the final scene in which the band had beat their ignominious retreat.

The truth is, this society, so unfortunately inaugurated, had never recovered the shock of that night, and showed no sign of reviving. Even the prestige of Dicky's leadership had been so rudely shaken that it required continual re-assertion on his part, and Stumpy and his following had more than once taunted him with the fear he had displayed and the celerity of his flight. Dick always asserted that he was not afraid, and had only conducted the retreat like a skilful general; his detractors declared he was the first to run, and the last to cry halt. And over this great question issue was repeatedly joined.

It was this very question which was being debated with more than usual warmth one evening nearly a week after Mr. Ashworth's murder. The young barbarians who generally, or occasionally, fought under Dick's leadership were gathered in Mr.

Wells's harness-room over a surreptitious fire to smoke clay pipes filled with tea, or some other pungent herb, from which much smoke and physical discomfort might be derived; and as Dick knew his father had a strong objection to this mode of spending an evening, he was enjoying himself to his heart's content. Stumpy had just arrived bringing with him a cake of snow on his boots, and a general air of cold criticism, as was usual with him. On this occasion he had one point of superiority which was generally admitted. It was his happy lot to be the possessor of a fine meerschaum, which no consideration would induce him to sell or barter, and from this platform of personal worth he was more than usually antagonistic and depreciatory.

He sat down and proceeded to fill his pipe from a handful of cloves which he carried loose in his pocket. Dick had been expatiating on the tyranny of old Pybus—so he denominated the respected master of the grammar school *tout court*—who had inflicted summary castigation on himself that afternoon for an offence committed the day before.

"I knew he'd lick me," said the young gentleman, "and I put on two pairs of trousers, but it's no use—it stings through. And look here, Stumpy, it was all your fault."

"I didn't break the window."

"No, but you said that I did."

"And didn't you?"

"Of course I did. But that's no reason for your going out of your way to peach."

"I suppose you'd have liked Py to give it to me?" said Stumpy, scornfully. "I'm not such a fool as to take another fellow's whaling."

"I didn't expect you would, but I promised old Py that I'd turn over a new leaf, and he thought I'd done it on purpose. If it hadn't been for that I shouldn't have minded a bit."

"I'd got to tell the truth, anyway," said Stumpy.

"The truth!" Dick retorted scornfully, "of course you'd got to tell the truth, but there's a lot of ways of telling the truth. A fellow can tell the truth like a man, and he can tell the truth like an old woman. And then you know an informer is worse than a liar."

This moral sentiment was received with general approval.

"It's a fact," Dick went on, "Titus Gates was the most disgusting wretch in English history—you know that, Stumpy?"

"Oh! that's all right when you come to history, but I don't see that's any reason for old Py flogging me. We are not people in a history."

"No, but we may. If you do something really great you're sure to be put in a history."

"You've got to die first," suggested Mops, as though that were a serious drawback to the distinction.

"In the arms of Victory," said Dick, gravely. "I don't want to be a prime minister, or any old fogey of that kind to have to learn no end of treaties, and petitions of right, and rigmarole of that sort. They

don't have any fun, and get sent to the Tower, and have all kinds of unpleasant things done to them, like Strafford and those chaps."

"They don't chop off heads now," said Stumpy.

"That doesn't matter a bit," said Dick loftily. "You have got to make long speeches in Parliament anyhow, and learn figures and things. I'm going to be a great general, and win no end of battles, and be buried in Westminster Abbey."

Between his efforts to keep his pipe alight Stumpy uttered an ejaculation of incredulity. Dick looked at him with questioning menace.

"Great soldiers never run away," said the cynic, "at least, I never heard of them running away."

"I'd like to see myself running away," said Dick.

"Well," was the answer, "I never thought much of the League of Blood. It was only silly nonsense and didn't amount to anything, but if I had got it up, I shouldn't have been frightened and run away, anyhow."

"I didn't," cried Dick warmly, "and I wasn't frightened. I only retreated, and every great soldier has got to do that sometimes. There was Frederick the Great, and Wellington."

"I don't know anything about those dead fellows," said Stumpy, to whose imagination history did not appeal, and who had an infinite contempt for the past, "but I know that you were the first to get out of the shed and you left the dagger behind you. You can't deny that," the speaker added triumphantly.

Stumpy had certainly scored. The point was an excellent one, and his audience felt its force. But Dick, who was taken aback for the moment, rose to the occasion.

"I left it there because I didn't want to carry it with me, and I didn't know you fellows would have funked coming back. It's not my fault that it's still there, and I'm going back to fetch it—sometime."

"Into the Grange garden?" cried Mops, nervously. "I wouldn't go back there for a thousand pounds."

"Why not?" said Dick, with his most superior air. "I'm not afraid."

"I'd like to see you," said Stumpy. "The Chinaman's in the house still."

"Ah Sin is a great friend of mine," returned Dick, "and I wouldn't be afraid of a Chinaman anyway."

"All right," cried Stumpy, the practical man, "we'll soon see whether Dick Wells is afraid or not. If he's not afraid he'll go back to the place now, and look for the dagger, and we'll wait here till he comes back. If he brings it with him we'll know where he has been, and nobody will be able to say he didn't do it. That'll be better than any amount of talk."

There was a prolonged silence. They all felt the awful nature of the undertaking, and not one among them would have taken all the world and attempted it.

Dick hesitated; he even thought for a moment of peremptorily refusing. That terrible house with the

cloud of crime hanging over it; that road haunted by mystery and horror; that lonely garden so near the place of the murder—he saw them all for a moment.

But he saw also the smile of derision on the face of his tempter, and regardless of all consequences he leaped to his feet.

“I’ll do it, Stumpy,” he flashed out, “and won’t I just give you a jolly old hiding when I come back.”

His friends saw that Dick was in deadly earnest, and, seeing that, their feelings immediately changed. They assured him they never doubted his courage, as indeed they never had; they pointed out the terrible danger he ran; they endeavoured by entreaty and warning to dissuade him. But Dick was obdurate; he was firm rock and could not be moved.

The breath of his young passion was hot in him, and he was determined to show all the world that even murder and mysterious death had no terror for him.

He pulled his cap down on his brow, buttoned up his coat, and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

“I won’t be more than half an hour anyway,” he said, “and you fellows aren’t to let Stumpy go till I come back, for I’m going to give him the best thrashing he ever got in his life. And——” Dick was splendidly dramatic and impressive—“if I don’t come back at all, you’ll know that I’ve died like a man, and you can tell everybody that wants to know that I never was afraid in my life of—anything. There’s nobody in Wickham who’d do it but my-

self, and as for Stumpy he'd eat his boots and trousers first."

"Indeed I would, Dick Wells, and that's the truth," said Stumpy, who felt that things were going too far and that some responsibility for the consequences might fall on his own sturdy shoulders. "I was only joking and nobody thinks you are afraid."

"I'm going," said Dick, who would just then have given a good deal that some one else might have been in his place, "and remember this, Stumpy, my blood may be on your head."

He opened the door and looked out into the blank night. There was snow on the ground and a slight thaw in the air. The harness-room was warm, and snug, and cheerful. The darkness was full of terrors; his heart failed him, and he hesitated.

Then he made a great effort.

He took a step forward, and closing the door quickly behind him, set out on his adventurous journey.

For the boy it was really a tremendous undertaking. He was right when he said there was no one in Wickham who would have done it but himself, for even in the daytime that lonely house with its dreadful association was now avoided as if it had been plague-smitten. The terror of the dreadful crime so recently committed hung over it like a cloud, and superstitious fears had already invented a hundred ghostly stories which were very real to the lad.

As he trudged through the darkness he remembered all this. His ears were alert for the slightest

sound. His heart was going like a steam engine in his breast. The hand that had struck that terrible blow might even now be within reach of him—the footsteps of the Unknown might even now be on his track.

Listen! His heart stopped beating; he looked fearfully over his shoulder. Then he went on again.

It was after eight o'clock, cloudy and very dark. On either side of the road, where the deep snow was thawing, the hedge was stretched like a black wall. He had passed the friendly light of the doctor's house at the corner of the road. There was no habitation now between him and the lonely Grange, and a hundred times he had made up his mind to give in and turn back.

But a certain dogged obstinacy restrained him—that and pride, which would not be humbled. He would never confess that he was afraid. He would never give in even if——

He had begun to run in a kind of dog-trot, but he soon settled into a steady, resolute walk. He was glad there was no moon. If he could not see, he could not be seen. And he would soon know the worst, for he was now at the gate of the Grange, with its black stone pillars and sepulchral yews. Behind the darkness was the old house with its burden of mystery, and a hundred yards further on the little private lane on which the Grange garden abutted.

His eyes were bright, and his lips were very white. So deeply had his feelings been worked upon, and so

highly had his nerves been strung, that he seemed to himself now to be walking in some kind of ghastly dream. He had almost lost control over his actions, and felt he had no choice left but to go on. Over and over he kept repeating, apparently without finding any meaning in the words—"Just wait till I get back. Won't I give it to old Stumpy!" And he seemed to find some consolation in the repetition.

He was in the lane now, and feeling his way carefully as he went. With a fine instinct he knew exactly where the little gap in the hedgerow was concealed, and he found it without much difficulty. He wriggled through and stood in the old garden with its unpruned trees, grass-grown walks, and clumps of straggling laurel.

At the further end was the tool-house, a wooden shed built in a hollow, and surrounded on every side by a dense, impervious growth of evergreens that quite concealed it from the view. A place sinister, forbidding, shut out from all the world.

There was no path running in this direction. Dick had to feel his way through the dank undergrowth and the labyrinth of straggling shrubs. His matches were ready in his pocket; he shuddered when he thought of the moment when he came to strike the light—that act he looked forward to as the very acme of his peril—the supreme moment of his fear. He had not much further to go now—his destination was almost at hand.

Hark! What was that? Surely he heard a foot-step—a voice. His very heart rose to his mouth.

He stopped to listen, convinced that he was not mistaken, certain that it was no mere fancy.

But it was not repeated. He could hear nothing. It was only his fears that were beginning to play tricks with his senses, for here, of all places in the world, there could be no living thing. He was not going to be such an ass as to give in now.

Again he went on, cautiously, and a minute or two afterwards went sliding down the bank and stood on the grass plot in the midst of which the tool-house lay.

The door was at the further end, and he was in the act of turning the corner of the house when he stopped suddenly, paralyzed with fear. It was not to be mistaken. It was too near, too distinct, too real, to be merely fancy.

A low moan, twice repeated—a moan of bitter pain, of intense agony, came shuddering through the night. It was almost at his hand—it was coming from the tool-house. And immediately following upon the moan he heard a voice, now hoarse with anger, now sibilant with hate—a voice like none he had ever heard before.

The perspiration broke on his forehead. He stood looking at the sinister building, as though it were an enemy advancing to meet him. He was far too terrified to make any attempt to escape. Then, as with staring eyes he looked straight before him, he saw a little stream of light coming through a place where the weather-worn timbers had parted a little, and,

upon this awful evidence of the reality of what he had heard, he gazed for a while as if mesmerized.

When he told the story afterwards he did not tell it quite in this way. It was no spirit of courage that prompted him; it was no grim resolution to pluck the heart out of the mystery. It was only a sense of irresistible fascination that drew him nearer as the moth is drawn by the candle.

He touched the wall of the tool-house with his hand. The trickle of light shining through was almost on a level with his eyes, but a little higher. And then he raised himself on his tiptoes and looked. What passed through his mind in those few seconds can only be known to himself. It was only for a few seconds that he looked. Then, without knowing what he did, he beat upon the wooden wall once with his hand, gave a great cry, and, turning round, raced up the bank for dear life, as if there were a thousand evil spirits behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

BRUISED and scratched and bleeding, nothing impeded Dick's flight. Wild terror, panic fear, gave him wings. His clothes were torn from his back. He tripped over the tangled undergrowth, but was on his feet in a moment. He had no sense of pain: indeed, he had no sense of any feeling now, even of terror. And he ran as he had never run in his life. The terrible sight that he had seen still rose before his eyes, and would not be shut out. That awful face, that uplifted knife, all the circumstances of that dreadful scene still kept their place in his vision and goaded him forward.

He never thought of the pursuit that might be behind him, or of the danger that he ran. He wanted to cry out, but not for himself. When he gained the high road he still kept on running with unabated speed, but with no clear thought of what was the best thing to do in this moment of emergency. Down the road he went, a slight, flying figure—past the gates of the Grange, past the corner of the Moor Road, and then he saw the friendly light in the doctor's house. It was like the flare of the haven

in a sea of storm. Of all men, Dr. French was the one man to help.

Without another thought he burst open the wicket and dashed up the walk. Never at the doctor's door had there pealed such an alarm, for Dick was almost beside himself. He thundered upon the door with all his young strength: he did not cease thundering.

Dr. French was resting after a hard day's work, and Patty was sitting over her work, with her thoughts very far afield. The study was very quiet; neither of them had spoken for some time. But at the first sound of Dick's clamorous rapping Patty jumped to her feet and threw down her needlework. Somehow, with a kind of instinct, she connected the alarm with that great and absorbing subject with which she had been busy.

"John," she cried, "something has happened. I am certain something has happened," and before her brother could answer she had rushed from the room in headlong haste.

She threw the door open and saw Dick standing on the steps; but, with the lamplight still in her eyes, she did not at first recognise him.

"What is wrong?" she cried. "What is it?"

"It's me, Patty," Dick gasped. "I—I——"

"Dicky Wells!" she cried, with a sense of disappointment, knowing Dick's impetuosity.

The boy could hardly stand; he had no breath left in his body.

"Come into the study," she said, "and tell my brother what is the matter. Is your father ill?"

"No, no," Dick cried, with a great effort. "Pat—I've seen him. He's alive."

"Who?" cried Patty, with a sudden catching of her breath.

"Percival—Mr. Colthurst. But there's no time. He'll be dead now."

Then Patty knew that it was serious. At that moment she felt that Dick had solved the mystery, and that Percival's character—she could not tell why she felt it—would be cleared. But he was in peril—in deadly peril.

She caught Dick in her arms, and, hardly knowing what she did, kissed him two or three times. Then she half led, half dragged, the boy into her brother's room.

It was a curious picture they presented. The girl's eyes were shining, and she was wild with excitement. The lad was completely exhausted; his clothes were torn from his back, and his face and hands were bleeding from innumerable scratches.

The doctor had risen from his chair, and stood looking at them in amazement. Besides, he always regarded Dick's adventures with a certain amount of suspicion, for he knew something of his chequered career. But he changed his attitude in a moment.

"John," cried Patty, "it's true, it's true! Dick has found Mr. Colthurst, and he's alive."

"Let the boy sit down, Patty, and give him time to speak. Heads up, Dick. I'll bring you round in a minute."

He poured out something in a glass, and held it to

the lad's lips. Dick drank unresistingly, and his colour came back to his cheeks.

"Ah! that's right. There's no harm done. Now for the story. What's this about Mr. Colthurst?"

Dick had again risen to his feet.

"Dr. French," cried Dick, "I've found him."

"That's good news, anyhow. Where?"

"In the old tool-house in the Grange garden."

The doctor began to suspect Dick was romancing again. The story was much too improbable for credence.

"Oh!" he said. "Anyone seen him but yourself?"

"No," Dick answered, seeing the look of incredulity on the face of his questioner. "But I saw him. You believe me, Patty?"

Certainly Patty believed him.

"That was a curious place for you to be, Dick. Might I ask what you were doing there?"

"They said I was afraid—at least, Stumpy did—and I went to fetch the dagger. I tell you, it's the truth. And he's being murdered. He'll be dead by this time."

"Murdered!" cried the doctor.

"I saw his face," cried Dick. "He was alive, and I heard him moaning. And Ah Sin had the knife in his hand."

"What was he doing with the knife?"

"I thought," said Dick, shuddering, "he was going to cut his throat. And he dropped it when I shouted."

"You shouted?"

"Yes, I shouted and I ran; and that's all."

"I think," said the doctor, "you have done a great night's work, for I am beginning to see the light. Now, Dick, tell me as quickly as you can what you saw, and nothing more."

"When I got to the tool-house," said Dick, "it was very dark. I was going round to look for the door, when I heard a voice. There was a little light coming through, and I looked in."

"You saw plainly?"

Dick nodded. "There was a candle on the table. Ah Sin was in the corner, and there was something at his feet. It moaned, and I thought at first it was an animal. He was bending over it with something that shone in his hand. And I saw it was a knife. Then Ah Sin touched the thing with the knife, and it moaned again. And I looked again, and I saw Mr. Colthurst's face as plainly as I see yours. I think there was a rope round him, but I'm not sure."

"Ah Sin was alone?"

Dick nodded again.

"That will do," said the doctor. "The thing is clear now, and they've been altogether on the wrong scent. Patty, you'd better get things ready, for we'll bring him here, and I'm afraid it may be serious this time. I'm going to take Archie with me, and between us I imagine we'll be enough for the Chinaman. To think of it—that unutterable scoundrel! Are you feeling fit to come back with me, Dick?"

The boy asserted that he was ready to go at once, and anywhere.

While the doctor went to look for the groom, Dick and Patty were left alone together. She said nothing, but looked at him with a look he did not understand. He did not like it, but he was quite confounded when she put her arms round his neck and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Oh! Dick, you are a darling," she cried, with her eyes full of tears.

"I say, Patty, I wish you wouldn't be an ass," he said angrily.

Five minutes later they were upon the road, the groom carrying a lantern, and Dick swinging by the doctor's side. No one spoke a word. It was an adventure entirely after the boy's heart; he felt that life was really beginning to shape itself according to his ideals.

When they came to the gates of the Grange the doctor stopped; they were lying open.

"There's been some one through here to-night," he said. "I'm sure they were closed when I passed here this evening. We can get into the garden this way, for there's a wooden gate at the bottom of the avenue. Keep the light up, Archie."

The avenue, with its double row of leafless trees that dripped in the thaw, was as black as ink, and silent as death; and Dick thought it smelt like a tomb. It brought them by the side of the old house, that rose before them like a dense shadow. There was no light anywhere but the feeble light from the lantern. Fifty yards further on they passed the desolate office houses, and then, turning the avenue

suddenly, they came to the little wooden gate of which the doctor had spoken. This also was lying open. And they stepped into the garden, the groom leading the way with the lantern.

Dick knew the way now, for he was on familiar ground, and a few minutes afterwards they had passed through the dense screen of laurels and stood before the shed. They all paused instinctively. There was not a sound; there was not a ray of light.

The doctor took the lantern from Archie's hand and pushed open the door, which gave way at his touch. As he looked in he could see nothing; the place appeared to be entirely empty, and for a moment he began to wonder whether it was not a wild-goose chase on which he had embarked.

But Dick sprang before him.

"There, there, Dr. French. In the corner."

It was true; something moved and moaned almost inaudibly, and then ceased. It was apparently a heap of rags; certainly, it did not seem human. The doctor laid the lantern on the table, and, running forward, bent over the insensate man. At a glance he saw that Dick was right; but whether he was alive or dead, he could not tell for the moment.

"Good God!" he cried. "Surely, this has been the devil's handiwork. Quick with the lantern, Archie."

He hardly recognised the man he had known, strong, defiant, masterful. He was worn to a shadow; his face was streaked with blood. A gag had evidently been used in his mouth, but it had slipped down, and he had been secured by a single

rope, wound over his arms and legs with malignant ingenuity. It had been impossible for him to move a limb for days.

Dick felt himself growing sick, and was duly ashamed of himself. But he could not bear to look at the sight. It was too horrible.

"I'm afeared it's not much use, sir," said Archie, as he helped his master to remove the rope; "there's not a tremble in him. He must have suffered awful."

"Go on," said the doctor, whose face was nearly as white as that of the man before him. "We'll have to give him a little of the brandy, and get him out of this as fast as we can. He is still living. See if you can get that old door off its hinges, Dick."

Dick was only too glad to find employment. Anything was better than standing idle and watching that white face, and thinking of the strong, laughter-loving man he had known. He set about his work with alacrity, and soon succeeded in tearing the hinges out of the rotten wood.

The doctor never relaxed in his ministrations, though little success seemed to attend his efforts. But Percival, though unconscious, was still living. The doctor removed his own overcoat and placed it over the prostrate man.

"It will be touch and go, Archie," he said. "We must get him home at once, and we can easily manage to carry him between us. Now, Dick, let us have the stretcher."

They placed Percival on the door, lifted the burden easily, and, with Dick going in front with the

lantern, the little procession made its way from the house of horrors.

Patty's white face met them on their arrival at the doctor's door. She had been awaiting their arrival in an agony of suspense, and every moment had seemed like an hour. She saw the dark burden, and then looked at her brother's grave face, as if to catch from it some glimpse of hope or gleam of comfort. Dr. French's face was perfectly impassive."

"Well, John?" at last she said timidly.

"I don't know," he answered gravely. "Perhaps——"

They carried him to the room he had occupied before, and there before their eyes Percival Colthurst fought a great fight with Death. For a time the struggle was doubtful, and a hundred times Dr. French despaired of the result; but at last the patient began to rally, and when the news was brought downstairs, Dick, who had not left the house, became fearful that Patty would renew her demonstration of approval of his conduct. She could not rest; her eyes were bright and shining, and Dick began to think he was mistaken in his estimate of her character, and she was like all the other girls he had known.

When the doctor himself came downstairs with the good news, Patty slipped quietly from the room. She hardly knew what she was doing; she felt that she could not help herself. She ran upstairs, and came noiselessly into the bedroom where Percival was lying. She advanced to the side of the bed and

looked at the thin, ghastly face lying among the pillows. She hardly dared to breathe, but as she stood there she recognised herself as by a flash of light, and knew that a woman's heart had been born in her breast. She knew now, and it was a great revelation to her, that she loved, and had loved, the man who was lying here. Nothing could change or alter her. Through good report and ill report, good fortune and bad, she would continue to love him till the end, whenever or whatever the end might be.

He was now breathing easily; he seemed to be asleep. His hand lay upon the counterpane. With a sense of timidity new to her, but with a great wave of tenderness rising in her heart, she touched it gently with her fingers. Then she bent down and pressed her lips upon it.

She was about to return as noiselessly as she had entered, when she looked at Percival's face. He had opened his eyes and was looking at her. And she saw there was knowledge in his eyes, and at that sight her virginal fears filled her with confusion, and she fled dismayed to her room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FATTED CALF.

THE news of Dick's discovery spread like wildfire, and for the moment that estimable young gentleman became a popular hero, to his own intense disgust. It entailed some very unpleasant explanations, which counterbalanced any pleasure or advantage to be derived from his sudden elevation to public distinction; and the parents of the young gentlemen over whom Dick had exercised an influence began to express the opinion that Richard required a larger sphere of enterprise than Wickham afforded. It is to be feared that Mr. Wells, despite his parental admiration, shared the same view, and it was only at Percival's urgent entreaty that Richard was not at once sent to a public school.

It was felt that something was due to Percival, and that he should be humoured, for he was very slow in returning to health. The suffering he had endured and the shock he had sustained had affected him deeply. They had, to some extent, affected his mind as well as his body. His wild and extravagant spirit had disappeared; he appeared quite willing to be dictated to and controlled; he had apparently lost

his sublime confidence in himself. However, he now looked out upon life; he showed a strong aversion to talk about the past or anything connected with it, and seemed even not to take the least interest in the hue and cry which had been instituted after his servant, who had contrived in some wonderful way to evade the hands of justice. Only on one occasion he had expressed himself freely as to what he had come through, and, having done that, he remained steadfastly silent upon the subject.

It was some days after he had been brought to Dr. French's house, and he was able to move about in a feeble way. Something French had said had aroused him, and he spoke with a good deal of feeling.

"Young! I shall never be even middle-aged again. The man who has endured the tortures of hell as long as I have, and finds himself somehow brought back to the earth again, sees with different eyes. It changes himself, the world, everything. What he thought before was real he discovers to be mere shadows. Good God! What I have come through! And I have been a fool all my life, French—a fool with glimpses of better things. When I came back to Wickham I was only a fool and a madman. I wanted to show the world I cared nothing about it—a miserable sort of Timon, who knew the right way to use his wealth. I wanted sympathy from nobody; I was sufficient for myself. And now I know my heart was full of hatred for that poor devil who is gone, and I would have hated him more if I hadn't despised him. I won't tell you how I

thought of paying off old scores—there is no use going into that. And even there I wasn't sincere. The whole business was only a jest, with bitterness in the heart of it. I knew Christopher, every inch of him—and I knew he couldn't help himself. From the very moment that he called on me first at the Grange I knew that he had some scheme on hand, and I threw myself in his way, and gave him every opportunity and encouragement. I invited him to practise on me; and I took Paradol, who was the greater rogue, to my heart like a friend. It flattered my absurd vanity; I saw through their scheme, and took pleasure in playing with them and leading them on. It was a game after my own heart. I thought I had won my hand, and finished with them both, but I hadn't seen everything. I had no idea that Christopher had ever seen Ah Sin alone, or had had any opportunity of coming to an understanding with him. I can't understand how he managed it. And I lived with Ah Sin for two years and never understood him. The curious thing was, I saved his life once."

"Tell me exactly what happened, Colthurst," said the doctor. "I have never quite understood."

"I hardly understand myself," said Percival wearily, "for it seems like a nightmare I have come through. When I had finished with Paradol, I invited Christopher to come back to finish up a little matter he and I had to settle. I thought he wasn't very willing, and I insisted on it; but when he arrived in the evening, he was perfectly ready to do

anything I wanted. He made a clean breast of it, and began to blubber over his sins and his miserable life. You know, he was in a bad way when he died. Everything was gone but his wife's little fortune. His creditors were pressing, and were going to sell him up. I couldn't help myself, and was really sorry for the poor devil. I think I promised to try and do something for him, and I asked him to stay and have supper with me. He took me in completely—that is, at first—for there was a moment when I began to suspect him. Ah Sin had come in and was laying the supper, when I glanced up and caught him looking at the Chinaman in a way that puzzled me. I thought for a moment they seemed to have some sort of understanding, and then I put away the idea as preposterous. I have thought it over since. Ah Sin was capable of anything, but he never would have made the attempt of his own initiation. But, once he was started, I have good reason to know how he could go on. It must have been half an hour after that when I began to feel the drug in my head, and, with the first sensation, that glance that I had intercepted flashed back on me. I knew in a moment there was foul play—that it was the accursed diamonds he was after. I tried to fight the drug down, but it was no use, and every moment it took a stronger hold upon me. With my head swimming and my legs giving way under me, I sprang up and caught Christopher by the throat. Then he threw off all disguise. I think he struck me, but I am not sure. At any rate, I did not quite lose

consciousness. In a kind of dream, in which everything is shadowy and indistinct, I remember Ah Sin coming into the room as I fell, and I remember hearing them talk about the stones. It was Christopher who took the keys out of my pocket—I remember hearing the sound of them, for he let them fall on the floor—and then they went out of the room together, and I didn't remember anything for some time."

"Have you any idea of what happened then?"

"I don't think they even got the length of my safe, which I kept in my bedroom. Ah Sin's knife had been busy before that, and he thought he had secured the whole plunder for himself. But he did not know the secret of the lock, though I do not know why I never showed it to him, and all the locksmiths in Europe could not have opened it—at least, Ah Sin could not, though I'm sure he spent a good many hours in trying. As I say, I had lost consciousness, and I remember nothing more till I found myself lying in the tool-house where you discovered me. I think it was the prick of Ah Sin's knife here in my shoulder that brought me round, for, when I came back to my senses, I was lying trussed like a fowl, and that devil was standing over me. At first I thought—well, never mind what I thought—but hell can't be much worse. He raved and swore, and threatened to cut my throat; but I had made up my mind he should never get the diamonds if I could help it. Wild horses would not tear the secret of the lock from me, and I would have died first. He came back three or four times every day, and I learned by

experience how much a man can suffer and still live. But the thirst was the worst. That incarnate fiend had set a jar of water beside me, just out of my reach, and I would have given everything but one thing to moisten my lips. I was tortured with pain; my brain was like a raging furnace, and I began to see the most ghastly visions. And through everything I could hear Ah Sin—"You dam fool, will you tell? Will you tell?" echoed and re-echoed till my ears seemed to split and my heart to break. I never knew before how obstinate I could be, though I suppose we all cling to life. There were no half measures in Ah Sin. But all the time I had a feeling that I was going to pull through, and when I heard Dick's cry, for I heard it plainly, I knew that things were near an end. I've had my lesson, French, and I don't want to think or talk any more about it. I suppose I shall have to tell the story at the inquest, and then I'll forget it as I have forgotten many things I ought to have remembered."

"The whole thing was so simple it seems almost incredible. It is curious that your life should have depended on a boy's wayward fancy; for we never should have thought of looking for you at your own door. If it had not been for Dick——"

"There are no little things in life," said Percival gravely. "What we call our great things are only the trifles. Have you heard anything of Paradol?"

"He was staying at the 'Half-Moon,' but he has gone back to town. Do you think——"

"Nothing. I have done with him. He may have

had something to do with poor Christopher's scheme or he may not, but, at any rate, he must have suspected Ah Sin when he heard his evidence. But I don't care. I have turned over that page in my life, and will never go back on it if I can help. In the end we all go to our own place."

"I am sure that is the law," said the doctor.

"And of Him who is beyond and above the law," said Percival flushing. "I think I'll try to sleep now."

During the period of Percival's convalescence Patty had sedulously kept out of his way, and had given him no opportunity for conversation with her alone. The revelation which had been afforded to her of the state of her feelings had surprised and startled her, and, while she could find no excuse for her own conduct, she hoped earnestly that Percival had not been conscious of the indiscreet act into which she had momentarily been betrayed. The recollection of that act was continually present with her, and it was intolerable to remember it. What could he think of her? What could she think of herself? Her brother saw there was something wrong, but, knowing Patty's way, he didn't interfere with her and asked no questions. As for Percival, he could not understand it at all. The incident which lay so heavy upon Patty's conscience had no place in his memory, though it might have made his mind easier if he had known it, for he began to fear she was resenting his presence in the house. He saw that she was anxious to avoid him; he saw that she

took every measure to prevent their being alone together. She was willing to talk upon any subject which had no connection with himself, and she certainly encouraged Mr. Piper more than she had ever done in her life before. Indeed, that gentleman had now become a thorn in the invalid's side. Whether it was that it gave him an opportunity to be near Patty, or whether it was that he saw a large opportunity for missionary work, in season and out of season he was unceasing in his ministrations. He was splendid in his apostolic zeal, and inexhaustible in his eloquence. He painted Percival's past life for him in the blackest colours, and seemed to take a genuine delight in adding touch to touch. Percival bore it all with unfailing good humour, and declared that it was a wholesome tonic, if a little bitter. But it was Mr. Piper who helped to clear the atmosphere.

He had been more than usually eloquent, and even unnecessarily severe. Patty's presence, instead of acting as a restraining influence, had appeared to supply edge and force to his exhortation. It had gone so far that she had ventured to interfere, though her interference, instead of lessening the storm, had only served to increase its severity. When he had left, filled with the conscious pride that he had discharged his duty, Patty was about to follow his example, when Percival restrained her.

"Won't you stay a minute or two, Miss French? I won't have many more opportunities of thanking you. It was very good of you to take my part, though, perhaps, it didn't do much good. Still——"

"I didn't take your part," said Patty, "but Mr. Piper annoyed me."

"Well, perhaps. But he's a good fellow, Piper, and I like him. He sees clearly what he has got to do, and he is not afraid to do it. There aren't many men like that, you know."

"I'm glad there aren't."

"A broken reed like myself can appreciate the type better than you. And it's discipline."

"No man has a right to speak like that—even a clergyman."

"You think not?"

"I am sure of it. Even if one had done all that he says——"

"Don't you think there's another view? Perhaps it is pleasant to feel that you are not so black as you're painted. And it does him good; it does him a world of good, and it does me no harm."

"I think you have changed a good deal, Mr. Colthurst."

"In some ways I have altered a little. But there is one thing in which I have not changed at all. Do you remember, Miss French, that I told you I was going to leave England?"

As she heard the altered tone she began to grow uneasy.

"I—I daresay you have a good many friends in South Africa. You will be glad to see them again."

"I have not many friends anywhere, and at my age—I am getting on to thirty-five—one doesn't make new friends every day. I had begun to hope that

when I left England I should leave at least one friend behind me who would remember me with feelings of kindness. But—but I am afraid I was mistaken. Do you ever dream, Miss French?"

"Yes," Patty admitted. "I sometimes think my dreams are the best part of my life. I do splendid things in my dreams, and never make any mistakes."

"Ah! I should like to dream all the time, then; but my dreams are always of impossible things. I dreamt once—it is not very long ago—that I might forget the past and rise up in a new day, with new things about me; but, you know, that is impossible. We have been making our future every day of our lives."

"I don't quite understand that way of putting it. I suppose you mean we reap what we sow."

"Yes, I mean that. It isn't a pleasant doctrine for some of us, but it's the truth. But I want to tell you what I dreamt."

The old horrible suspicion recurred to her mind, but he was so grave and so earnest that she was not sure.

"When I came back to England," he went on, "I had no thought of anything but myself. I took pride in the fact that I could fight my own corner, and I wanted no companionship but my own. A man has his illusions, Miss Patty, as well as a boy. Then, one day I met a girl"—his tone was so cold and so level that she could not tell what was coming—"and almost from that moment my dream began. I dreamt that somewhere life might have happiness

in store for me, and that in the joy and happiness of another I might take a new pleasure. I dreamt—I know it was pure folly—that I was not too old for love. No, I do not think that was the folly. The folly was in thinking I could ever find any response to that love. But, at any rate, there were reasons then, or what I thought were reasons, why I could not speak.”

Patty understood him now. She did not dare to glance at his face.

“The reasons—I cannot think of them without shame—have disappeared, but I have awakened from the dream. I know that it was merely folly—a dream that had no promise in it of the day. I remember only the sweetness. I shall remember it as long as I live. You are not angry with me?”

“Angry? no,” she replied, hardly knowing what she said. “I wasn’t sure you meant——”

“We will leave it there. That is one of my dreams it is a pleasure to remember.”

“But—but are you sure it is altogether a dream?”

He looked at her with wonder. It was curious, with all his experience, how little he knew about women. Then he rose to his feet.

“Patty!”

“I meant—I meant——”

“I cannot say what I want to say, but I am leaving England and all I love behind me. I would not give you pain for the world, but you have given me hope; and, Patty, I love you.”

He caught hold of her hands and held them in his own.

"You do not speak. Then, dearest, I may hope."

"No," said Patty, "not hope. I thought you knew."

"Knew?"

"That you might believe I have loved you all the time."

When Dr. French returned home he found that Patty had recovered her usual composure.



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